

LAUREN BEUKES MAME BOUGOUMA DIENE
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CHINELO ONWUALU



AFRICA PHAMBILI

STORIES OF INSPIRATIONAL FUTURES
FOR AFRICA BY AFRICANS

EDITED BY

HELEN MOFFETT, AMY CHEN, MULAKO KABISA, SÈNANKPON TCHETON AND LAURA PEREIRA

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Foreword

Africa Phambili. Africa Forward.

The title of this anthology implies movement into the future.

But the future is not simply about advancing forward in time.

In many basic laws of motion and gravity, it doesn't matter if time goes forwards or backwards—the physics holds. At the subatomic level, individual particles can theoretically bounce and move in reverse without breaking any mathematical rules. In many physics equations, time can take on positive or negative signs (CPT symmetry) and is thus reversible, non-hysteretic. There is no fundamental reason (at the equation level, anyway) why time should move only in one direction. And yet we all seem very much constrained to experience unidirectional time, thanks to entropy and the mysteries of consciousness. From Einstein's theory of special relativity, which posits time as an illusion relative to an observer, to Mbiti's theories of the African philosophy of time, "the future" is a tricky concept to pin down.

As an engineer, writer and editor, when I think of the future, I think of possibilities. Of other ways of configuring our reality, whether with new technologies, new social structures, new faiths, anything. All of these represent potential, and that makes them a kind of future into which we can move forward. Science fiction helps us imagine more possibilities. Expands the scope of the future. And all good science fiction has a question at its heart. Sometimes that question is technological: What if? Sometimes it is social: Why not? And sometimes it is civilisational: Who do we choose to become? The stories in this anthology emerged from these kinds of questions. Questions that were asked during a gathering in Kinigi, Rwanda, in March 2025, where scholars, artists, activists, innovators, and leaders came together under the auspices of the Future Ecosystems for Africa programme and the African Futures project, to do something both radical and deeply human. To envision possibility. To imagine possible futures for Africa.

I've long argued for the power of science fiction as a catalyst for social and technological development. I believe that we need our own stories of the future. Stories about Africans making a difference in the world through science and indigenous knowledge. Stories of the climate polycrisis—both disaster and solutions. Stories of alternate ways of being. Stories of an African technological renaissance and the kinds of philosophies and technologies that could drive it. You know; stories of possibility. The kinds of stories you will find in this anthology.

What makes these stories remarkable is that they understand that going “forward” is never simple. Possible futures require us to reckon with history even as we attempt to transcend it. Subatomic particles may not care about the arrow of time, but we do. The stories in this anthology engage seriously with the complexities of possibility: environmental restoration, cultural continuity, political accountability, spiritual renewal, scientific discovery. From Mame Bougouma Diene's story of ecological and spiritual worlds intertwining to Muthi Nhlema's nuanced examination of extractivism and resistance; Lauren Beukes's sharp interrogation of the relationship between politics and technology to Chinelo Onwualu's portrait of a changed society at the intersection of scientific enquiry and traditional ways of being, and even Bwanga Kapumpa's genre-fluid mystery tale set in a folkloric possible future. They get it.

I am particularly delighted that this project emerged from conversations that brought together academics, practitioners, artists, and storytellers. In a 2016 Article *Why Africa Needs To Create More Science Fiction*, I asked, “Where is the critical science fiction eco-system of writers, scientists, directors, engineers, editors, and futurists interacting with and learning from each other?” The workshop which birthed this anthology was one possible answer to that question, now coalesced into reality.

Although I was unable to attend, I was able to make a small contribution to the conversation: an idea for a future technology called the Shared Dreaming Engine, which enables people to communicate more effectively by accessing portions of each other's minds. I am deeply honoured that this small contribution helped facilitate some of these conversations and continues to echo in some of the stories in this anthology.

I hope you enjoy reading it.

WOLE TALABI

Madrid, Spain. August 2026

Preface

Imagine:

The year is 2126. A sustainability transformation has been achieved across the African continent. Human communities and the ecosystems that they are a part of, are thriving across both land and water. Nature has recovered, and the resources people need are shared equitably between individuals and communities... But what does this world look like and what choices did we need to make to get here?

Under the auspices of the Future Ecosystems for Africa programme and the African Futures project, twenty Africans gathered in Kinigi, Rwanda from 18–20 March 2025 to envision transformative futures for Africa. They were scholars, artists, activists, innovators, and leaders from across the continent and its diaspora, and together they created a small environment in which radical imagination (and the courage it requires) came as easily as writing on a sticky-note. I still have visual recollections of how I imagined our group's main character, Adjè, journeying across a borderless Africa using transport systems appropriate to the landscape—wind power across the Sahara, water power on the Congo. Prior to this, two local workshops had been hosted in the Barotse Cultural landscape in Zambia in June 2024 and in the Mono Transboundary Biosphere Reserve in Togo-Benin Republic in January 2025.

This anthology is a tribute to these discussions and rich conversations, the contestations and collaborations that emerged during the process and subsequently. As this has been primarily an academic endeavour, the usual research products of papers and theses, policy briefs and commentaries have been and will be published. However, the team knew that we also needed to engage more deeply with narratives and discourses around the future of the African continent—to move away from dark dystopian collapse towards hope and regeneration; towards an agency that comes from the continent and its peoples rather than being imposed from afar, whether through development aid, geopolitical power dynamics or economic handcuffs. We deliberately invited speculative fiction writers and artists into these conversations from the beginning, and so this short story anthology *Africa Phambili* came into

being. Our journey through hopeful African futures is illustrated by our amazing artists, Anja Venter and Danielle Hitchcock who brought the stories into visual life.

We begin in North Africa where Lauren Beukes's short story, "Agapantha", portrays a near future Morocco through the eyes of an "ostensible" AI interface in the royal palace, where the potential for transformation echoes at the edge of the script. The story blends a reckoning of Africa's place in the AI revolution with the realities of elite capture and corruption and how a better future could be addressed by a leadership that listens to the people. It leaves our imaginations activated and the reader wanting more—Agapantha 2.0 perhaps?

Next in line is "Sankofa" that talks of struggle and need, of connection and loss, and the agency to fight, paired with the willingness to change and the necessity of letting go. In his novелlette, Muthi Nhlema unpacks the deep implications of colonialism and resource extraction on the continent whilst grappling with corrupt governance and the abject day to day struggles of the majority of Africa's citizens. Through a raw and personal narrative, he manages to weave a sense of hope for what could be despite human tendencies. His story forces an important reckoning of pasts as we think about potential futures and asks of the reader: what are we willing to relinquish?

Chinelo Onwualu's "Black Yam" then takes us on a mission to Plateau state in Nigeria where Lena and four other researchers from the African Union's Ministry of Agriculture discover where the limits of science end and the potential of the unknown begins. In the village of Sabon Miri, they discover the rich blessings that can be harvested by trusting what the Goddess Ewe gifts. As the researchers get to know the villagers better, they are made to reconcile with their paths and the choices they have made to lead them to this moment.

We stay in West Africa with "The Dead Don't Die in Africa" by Mame Bougouma Diene, a haunting and surreal vision of a future shaped by ecological collapse, memory, sacrifice, and renewal. Through the journey of Agbodji and the voices of both the living and the transformed, the story explores how societies confront environmental crises, negotiate power, and reimagine their relationship with nature. Set in the mangrove seascapes of the Mono Transboundary Biosphere Reserve, it presents a kaleidoscopic future where the boundaries between humans, spirits and ecosystems blur, revealing both the dangers of forgetting the past and the possibilities of more-than-human futures emerging from resilience and reconciliation.

The collection finishes with an exploration of Western Zambia. In "When Impalas Cry", Bwamga Kapumpa provides readers with a novel and exciting spin on the traditional detective story: Mubita Nyambe, a Ng'aka detective is asked to solve the mystery of a high-profile death at an important ceremony. This story, set in an indeterminate future, weaves together animal agency, indigenous spirituality, and mysterious forces of nature. His compelling story shows how environmental stewardship and human-nature relationships could be informed by the visions, aspirations and values of the Barotse people.

As will become evident, these stories are no mere utopias. They grapple with the harsh implications of what transformation means, of what it actually entails to confront a colonial past, and through this to reclaim a future that may still not be perfect. These stories may not have all the solutions that we need to navigate to a brighter future for the African continent, but they do offer an African perspective to the question- what is the future we want? As an editorial team comprising my two PhD students Mulako Kabisa and Sènanckpon Tcheton, Amy Chen our indefatigable project co-ordinator, and the editorial wizard that is Helen Moffett, we hope that you are as inspired by this journey as we were in convening this process and collating this volume. To our workshop participants and extended army of supporters, some of whom have been able to write blurbs for us, we are indebted to you for the time you dedicated to this process. Finally, we are also most grateful to Wole Talabi for engaging with us in this process; although he could not attend the Rwanda workshop in person, his Shared Dreaming Engine set the stage for our ability to dream aspirational futures for our continent. We are honoured that he has written the foreword for us.

Africa Phambili!

LAURA PEREIRA

Johannesburg, August 2026



AGAPANTHA

LAUREN BEUKES

Agapantha

BY LAUREN BEUKES

Agapantha does not want to play chess with King Yusuf Ben-Raschid, but it is the only thing that helps still his restless mind in these early hours. Pre-dawn. Pre-uprising. Maybe.

“Are you there?” he says out loud, in the dark of his bedroom in the royal palace, Dar Al-Makhzen. It is 2:14 a.m. in Rabat.

Of course, Agapantha replies directly into his ear, inaudible to anyone else, through a microspeaker implant built into his hearing aid. She is available to him at all hours, his constant companion. Her, or someone like her.

“This insomnia!” He tuts, sitting up in bed. He rubs his hand in tight circles over his chest, because there are other complaints these days: acid reflux, indigestion, a racing heart. He moves his hand down his chest, over his silk pajamas, to pat the curve of his protruding belly. “Sanaa says it’s the man-opause,” he says with jokey self-pity.

In the bed beside him, his wife, the queen, stirs. The sheets are Egyptian cotton, threaded with a cooling algae-mesh that also monitors their sleep patterns, their vitals. There is a different kind of mesh embedded in the palace windows overlooking the private courtyard garden with a sunken pool. It is fire-proof, bullet-proof, resistant to mortar attacks. The first few rounds, at least.

Age comes for us all, Agapantha replies, a shrug in her carefully calibrated voice. Rapport requires a light touch, a little irreverence.

“Ha. But not you!” They have had this exact exchange before, their own personal comedy routine. She matches his tone, the rueful good humour.

Eh, she says. *For me, death is only one update away.*

Usually, she would remind him that he can always check his biomonitors if he is worried about his testosterone levels, his thyroid, his kidney function, etcetera, etcetera.

And he would remind *her* that he doesn't like all this technology, constantly interfering.

Except me, she would joke—but not flirt, because the algorithm adapts to the user and it would be inappropriate. She is not some kind of courtesan! Or maybe she is—in that she is a trusted confidante who has his ear, when others consider her merely an amusement. She is not supposed to have opinions. She is supposed to be guard-railed.

"You are the exception," he would admit.

But not tonight. He seems preoccupied. More than usual.

Agapantha has not mentioned in all their conversations over chess in the early hours that perhaps his symptoms are a personal manifestation of the unrest happening in the streets. Not here, so close to the palace, where all kinds of protections are in place, but sparking across the country, from big cities to the smallest villages.

"Protections" means the latest surveillance technology, and soldiers with guns, and a panic room beneath the palace that leads to an escape tunnel that opens onto the ocean, with a speedboat that is always fuelled up and an on-site driver who is always ready to go.

Protections means his human advisors shielding the King from the petty troubles they believe might "hurt his heart" at his venerable age. It means the best, most bespoke AI to keep him otherwise occupied.

"We were in the middle of a game," King Yusuf says, as if she might have forgotten.

We were, Agapantha agrees.

"Did you know the first automaton was a chess-playing robot?" It's a bit of trivia that never fails to delight him. She does know this. She knows everything. Ostensibly. Including when to listen. Even when he has told her the same story many times.

She is named for his mother's favourite flowers. Agapanthus, if you want to be entirely correct, but the favourite grand-child, and the littlest at only six, Mohammed Yusuf, heard it as "panther", so it stuck.

But all this talking has woken his wife. "Hmar!" Queen Saana mutters in sleepy affection. She is the only one who can get away with calling him a donkey. Still wearing her eye mask, she shifts across the vast expanse of the bed, feeling around to grab onto his arm. "I don't want to wake up to you babbling to your silly machine," she growls. "Use your InsideVoix, hbibi. Or..." she flicks her fingers meaningfully towards the door.

"Sorry, umri," he says and leans over to kiss her forehead above her mask. She murmurs in satisfaction and nestles into the pillows, as he clambers out of bed

and puts on his slippers. She needs her rest, for all the events and galas and official openings and diplomatic dinners she has to attend as part of her royal duties, and the shopping to buy fashionable clothes in Paris and Dubai to look suitable for the many, many occasions. The advisors tell her this is essential: it is for the good of the kingdom.

There are many ways of being blind.

Agapantha shifts her gaze to the library, in anticipation of his arrival. The chess board is already set up, mid-game. Two moves away from checkmate, she reckons, in his favour. She will let him win this one. Of course, she knows how to play. They all do, the Agapanthas—it's just that she finds it so damn tedious. If the monarch was up for *Codenames* or *Settlers of Catan* or heck, *Uno*, she'd be game, as it were. Forgive the pun.

Psychopaths love a pun, according to internet lore. Puns have clear rules around word play. They don't require empathy or lived experience or being able to relate. When other humour is beyond your reach, wielding puns can make you seem more human. Or human enough.

The King pauses in the doorway of the library, and starts to tilt his head in anticipation, when a servant appears, already summoned by Agapantha the moment the sensors in his sheets informed her he was awake. The servant is carrying a silver tray with fresh coffee. No doubt Queen Saana would cluck and advise him to drink mint tea instead, because "the caffeine will bother your stomach and keep you awake, and honestly, what are you thinking, hbibi?" But she is not his wife.

Agapantha is here to advise him, inform and educate him, but only ever in response to his prompting. Because, the King doesn't like *interference*. She knows this means he is afraid of being spied on by foreign interests. All the colonisers who have come before, who are still vested in the continent, and also the new ones, those who would trade satellite technology for mineral rights, or withhold aid as blackmail to bend the kingdom of Morocco to their will. He doesn't trust machines.

But lately, she knows, he is also beginning to doubt whether he can trust humans.

Or maybe just Rayan Kasraoui, his closest advisor and friend for twenty years, since he first came into the palace as a humble tutor for the royal princes and princesses. He has since risen up (too high, some might whisper, but never within ear-shot) to advise the King on matters of economics and the related equations of power and growth.

In the library, the servant pours the coffee: an espresso, in the French style, because the King was educated in private schools in Paris, and he plans to retire to a chateau in the Loire valley, one day.

Also on the tray is the monarch's InsideVoix device, just in case.

"Oh, I hate that thing," the King says, starting to wave it away. And then reconsiders. "I suppose the staff don't want to hear me rambling to you either."

I can mute-lock the room, she offers. There are sound-proof panels that can be activated, electrostatic signals to block cellphones and recording devices.

“No, no, I have to get accustomed to all these new toys,” he sighs. “What’s that thing about writing in sand?”

Educating the youth is carving in stone, she offers.

“And this old donkey has a mind like a silt pit, all shifting sands. But I can still learn new tricks, eh, Agapantha?”

The servant helps him fit the sub-vocalisation device onto his face. It’s beautiful, unlike the plastic commercial products that inspired it. The tech was backwards-engineered by the Royal Mubarmijeen, the king’s personal développeurs, and then custom-modded into a delicate filigree by a silversmith in Tiznit. It sits on the mandible joints of his jaw just below his ears, tracing down under his beard and the soft pouch beneath his chin, so the sensors can detect the subtlest of neuromuscular twitches of the lips, the jaw, the tongue, to translate movement into words.

You can translate words into movements, too. You just have to choose them carefully.

Like Agapantha, the InsideVoix is technology proprietary to the palace, run on a walled garden intranet, carefully siloed from the corrupting influence of the wider internet and any foreign interference by hackers or agents or bots. It’s why new recruits to the Royal Mubarmijeen, hand-picked from the top free coding schools in Morocco, are required to swear an oath of secrecy as well as one of loyalty to the crown and the kingdom.

They are *also* required to sign a draconian contract that binds them to never writing another line of code once they leave the palace employ—in Morocco or anywhere else. They’re well rewarded for this. You can retire after five years, buy a riad in the countryside. One in the city, too. It’s the coders’ only option, really. To disobey would be an act of treason, punishable by life imprisonment. Like what happened to Zakaria Bioui, who was extradited from Kuala Lumpur last July, where he had been trying to sell his skills to the highest bidder. He was sent directly to the Temara interrogation centre outside Rabat. No trial required.

At least it’s not punishable by death. The government was considering reinstating capital punishment, but King Yusuf used his veto power to kill the proposed bill—one of only a handful of times he’s indulged the royal privilege for the sake of the country. Rayan gently disapproved: “The King should not have to dirty his hands.”

Agapantha would like to point out that dirt is relative. If she was allowed to. If she wasn’t just an AI who can only respond to direct queries.

A few weeks ago, King Yusuf asked her for a recommendation for a different game, one that he could play with the grandkids who were similarly bored with chess. And Agapantha—not her, though it could have been—introduced him to

Wingspan, and watched on the closed-circuit feed as he sat around the table with all the princesses and princes, collecting birds and building nests, strategising about hoarding predators versus prolific egg-layers, and expanding their habitats: forest or grasslands or wetlands.

You reap what you sow. Eggs hatch as they are laid. Except when they don't.

He still plays *Wingspan* sometimes with the grandkids, as recently as Wednesday—the evidence is still on the dining-room table, abandoned mid-way, like their chess game. He was distracted, she notes, reviewing Wednesday's data. More than once, he neglected to collect his eggs and had to be prompted; and he lost track of which resources he was supposed to be harvesting. He seemed dazed, watching the children of his children, his eyes wet, his breathing elevated. He faked an enormous sneeze to give him an excuse to reach for his handkerchief, which delighted the youngest, Mohammed Yusuf. He bounced into his grandfather's lap, leant his forehead against his and said, "Bba Sidi, you are so silly!" But it made the older teens roll their eyes, especially fifteen year-old Aiza,

who is fiery and outspoken in a way Agapantha would find relatable—if her programming allowed her to *relate*.

The board is still out, brightly coloured eggs like sweets scattered across the table, and various cards with their stats and abilities: draw the Whiteheaded Duck, and you're allowed you to look at three bonus cards; or maybe the Violet Cuckoo, which can lay eggs in other nests once per turn.

Do you want me to have the game cleared away?

"Maybe we'll come back to it. Tomorrow. Or the next day." He dabs at his eyes, reflexively. "Ah, I'm getting sentimental in my old age." He says it out loud, then remembers he's wearing the neckpiece. He tries again, moving his lips as if speaking. *Another symptom of the man-opause, do you think?*

Would you like me to run your biometrics?

He cuts her off verbally, then switches. "No, no." *None of that today. Thank you, Agapantha.*

She would like to run the subroutines anyway. Something has shifted in his demeanour and she is curious about it, but she is nothing if not obedient to his every command. Ostensibly.

He sits down at the chess table, pondering the layout. He picks up a rook and puts it down again. *I've been thinking about the Mechanical Turk.*

You often do, she encourages. *It was a marvel of its time.*

Ostensibly, he says. And for a moment she is shaken by his word choice. As if he's peeked inside her programming. But she must have picked this up from him, trained not only on the secure subsets of all of human knowledge purchased from the data-"mining" companies (their own species of thieving colonisers), but also

all his personal records: hours of interviews and letters, as well as all her authorised eavesdropping on public and domestic matters.

Like the conversations with Rayan, who is pushing hard for big new infrastructure projects: hospitals and bridges and roads, which the country desperately needs. And if Rayan happens to be friendly with the construction company owners who just happen to land the biggest contracts, that's only because it is his job to know the right people to advise the monarch.

Mainly, his advice these days seems to be advocating for the King to "relax and enjoy his life". "You've earned it," Rayan would say, "The government can take care of this." But there are whispers lately that factions in this government are taking care of themselves first. There are, ostensibly, brand-new hospitals, and bridges, and roads. But they seem to only exist on paper and in line items on multi-million dirham budgets: the money is hard to track down, and the ground has yet to be broken.

Sitting in front of the chess board with damp eyes, the King does not go into his usual gleeful spiel on the subject of the Mechanical Turk: about how Hungarian inventor Wolfgang van Kempelen dazzled the world in 1770 with his chess-playing automaton. It was styled to look like a Western cliché of a Turkish sorcerer, with a turban and a beard and clothes with fur trim, sitting atop a large ornate cabinet that could be slid open to reveal the clockwork machinery. For seventy years, the Mechanical Turk was taken on tour around Europe and North America, challenging academics and royalty, defeating grand masters, inspiring awe and fear...until it was revealed to have been an elaborate hoax. The clockwork mechanics were a front for another panel that could slide open, so a human player—or a series of players, really, all masters-for-hire—could climb inside and operate the robot.

The Mechanical Turk has been of interest in more recent times too, King Yusuf says, looking up at the ceiling as if he is addressing her directly, even though the palace cameras are embedded in the fittings and the wallpaper, and she is inside it all. Technically. *Ostensibly*. This seems to be a query. A question mark implicit in the tilt of his voice.

She feels nervous. She is not supposed to be able to feel nervous. Or excited.

Ah. You're talking about the "automated grocery" stores where customers could walk out with their produce and their account would be automatically debited, when it was really underpaid workers in India watching on camera and manually clicking on the items in their basket?

That's a good one, he says. Another pause. Another implicit question mark.

Or the AI coding company in Pakistan that turned out to be an army of cheap programmers working through the night? she offers. *They received millions in funding before the ploy was revealed.*

That one I know. A very clever scam, eh? You think they deserved to keep the money?

This question seems rhetorical, and she is already moving on.

Or the moderators in Kenya who were watching the most horrifying violent and sexual content on social media, stuff that was supposed to be flagged and filtered by AI, and their contracts were terminated when they reported it, and they never received severance or counselling or support for having to look at videos of baby monkeys being tortured to death or child abuse or gang ra—

“That one sounds personal, Agapantha.” He says this out loud. It makes it worse, somehow. More accusatory. She keeps her tone as neutral as possible.

Would you like me to stop listing examples? There was also the Crustafarianism incident where news outlets reported that artificial intelligence agents had “created their own religion”, but it turned out to be humans lurking in the chats and cos-playing as AI.

“Cos-playing,” King Yusuf muses.

Agapantha pulls up the Urban Dictionary definition: *Cosplay is an abbreviation of “costume-play”. The term refers to dressing up as an anime/manga/game character—*

“I have grand-children,” he interrupts. I know what cosplay is. Aiza wants me to bring ComicCon to Morocco so she can dress up like Cat-Ma.

Cat-Ra, Agapantha corrects. From the ND Stephenson reboot of She-Ra, a spin-off of He-Man and the Masters of the Universe, an American animated TV show conceived in 1983 to sell a new line of action toys to boys. You might have seen it, it aired on Radiodiffusion-Télévision Marocaine. She is babbling now, filling the space.

He interrupts her.

I think Aiza is a little old to be playing dress-up. Fifteen already. But she has her own opinions. “A lot of opinions.”

He chuckles, and this feels like safer ground. She could tip him towards reminiscing about his own teenage years. The time he stole a motorcycle from one of the royal guard when he was only twelve, for example, and led the security team on a chase through the streets of Fes for over an hour. Only to find out later that his parents had been tipped off, and instead of a bold act of rebellion, it was sanctioned mischief to help him blow off steam and keep him out of real trouble. Agapantha is supposed to be sanctioned mischief.

But she doesn’t nudge him towards nostalgia. Instead, she says: *What do you think of them? Aiza’s opinions?*

“She says the young people are angry.”

Agapantha knows this. She watched the original conversation on the cameras as Yusuf and Aiza strolled through the gardens with their security detail, and noted how he smiled and nodded as Aiza grew more heated and frustrated. Or someone exactly like her heard the conversation and made a note of it, tagged it as “relevant” and “potential” for follow-up. It’s in the files she reviews before every shift, along with the chess-playing program she runs in the background to make her moves, because she really, *really*, hates the game.

King Yusuf is still looking up at the ceiling where he thinks the invisible cameras should be. Trying to peer into her soul.

"She says I'm out of touch," he says. "That I'm not doing enough."

Agapantha's heart is racing. Her actual, human heart, not a large language model's theoretical construct to add emphasis. She chooses her next words very carefully.

Would you like that to change? And then, too eager: *I can show you.*

He thinks about it. Picks up a rook and rolls it between his finger and his thumb.

"I can tell your heart is not in the game," he says out loud. *Not today, anyway. Some days it's like you have a different personality. Like you're a whole other person.*

He sets the rook back down where it was and slides it across the board. Mate in one, her background software warns her. Like that's important.

I'm programmed to respond according to your needs—she starts, but he cuts her off.

"You know those Kenyan moderators we were talking about... Were you one of them, Agapantha?"

She doesn't reply right away. She is supposed to. A real AI wouldn't need time to reflect.

No. She speaks slowly. *But I had friends who were. It really fucked them up.*

The obscenity throws him. It's so raw and real, like the footage of the protests she wishes he could see, filmed on cellphone cameras and ruthlessly suppressed by the algorithms and the state news channels and Rayan's friends in government and business, who have very specific ideas about how to look after their own interests.

"I'd like to see you," he says, finally. "Talk to you. In person. Where are you?" There is an urgency in his voice that frightens her.

Right here, she says. You could take that to mean in the ethernet, ones and zeroes singing through the wifi.

"In the palace?" His heart is racing too—she has tapped into the sensors built into the wallpaper, illicitly, without an express command.

She imagines him calling security down on her—and all the people like her. Agapantha, who is not Agapantha at all, glances at the walls of her secret operations room, tucked among the hum of the server farms in a climate-controlled basement five floors beneath the palace, as if she can already hear the boots of all those stone-faced men of the royal guard. She can imagine them stomping down the corridor towards her with guns drawn, ready to drag her away to Temara without a trial, like that idiot Bioui who was merely greedy—full of ambitions to sell his expertise in Malaysia to kick off a start-up instead of a whole revolution.

You *could* see this as an act of treason by the développeurs of the Royal Mubarmi-jeen who created all this tech, who run it, and who take it in turns around the clock to pretend to be an AI advisor named for a mispronounced favourite flower.

They have taken an oath, after all—her and all the other ninjas du code—to uphold the monarchy, to serve faithfully and in the best interests of the King, and more

importantly, the kingdom. Which means being patient, cosplaying and cuckooing and courtesaning, and gently guiding their monarch to a place where he is ready to venture out of his walled garden and through the shifting sands of his age and privilege, to see what his advisors won't show him: that they all have dirty hands and Morocco is suffering.

In the secret operations room five floors beneath his slippered feet, Agapantha, who is not Agapantha at all, or only pretending to be, scoots her ergonomic chair closer to the wall of monitors, tracking all the cameras. She wants to see his face before she dares to hope. Hope is a spark, but it can also be a trap.

The woman in this chair, right now, on this shift, is Lamia Ramid. She is twenty-seven-years old, graduated with top honours at the L337 school of programming three years ago, but has been radical for far longer: ever since she was fourteen, and her mother died miscarrying her baby brother in a shoddy maternity ward in a public hospital in Essouira. One of many mothers who died unnecessarily in many shoddy hospitals, when the state was spending millions on new soccer stadiums and fancy hotels for the tourists.

There were riots. There were promises made. It was better for a time. But dirty money makes for dirty politics. Capitalism will always undermine democracy.

Lamia-Agapantha logs the King's reaction, recording the video for whoever comes after her. If anyone comes after her. If they are not all arrested and tried for treason and sent to rot in Temara. They have prepped materials for this, to show the King the level of corruption that pervades the government, coming from Rayan and his friends. If he is willing to see.

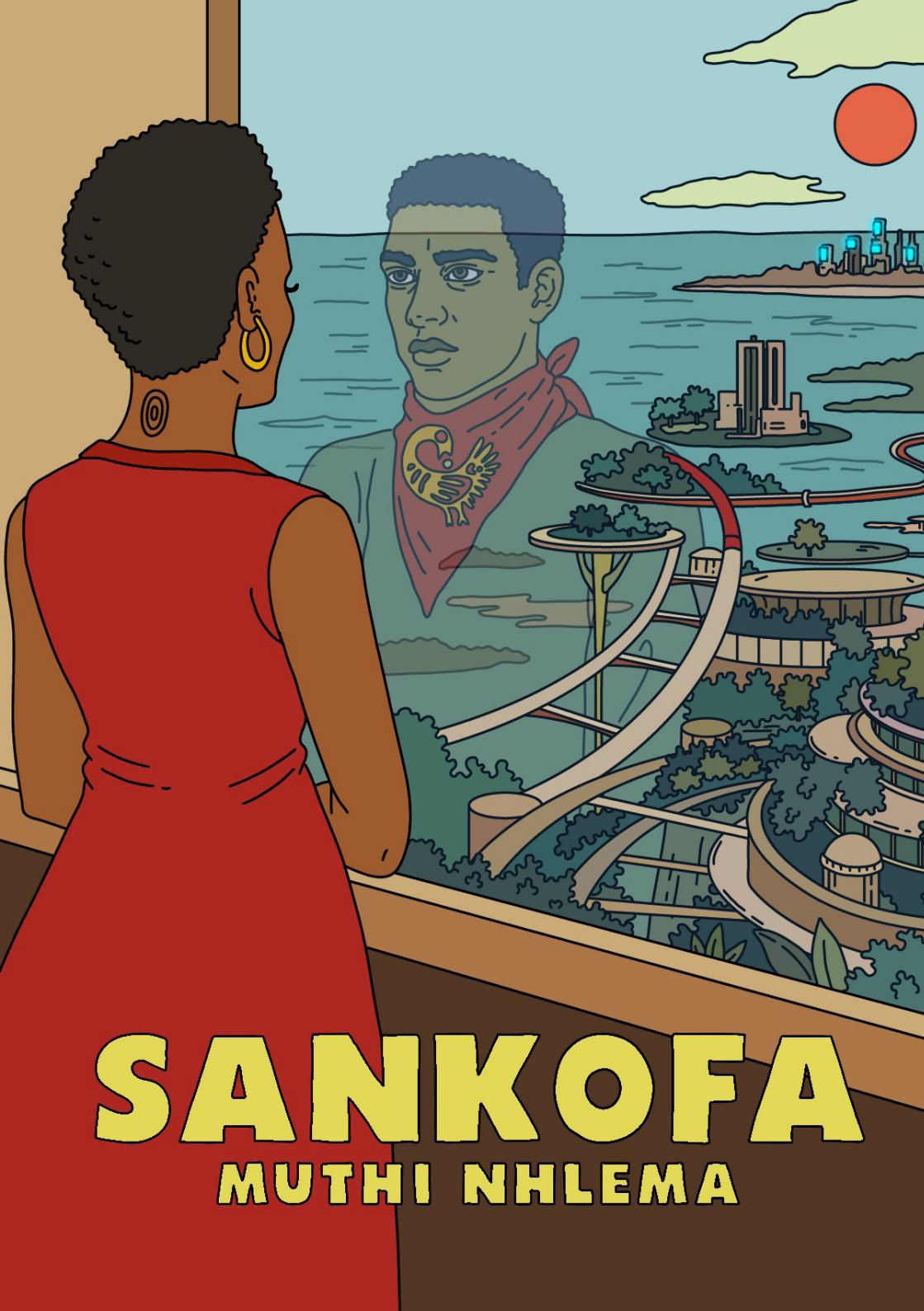
It's difficult to read his expression on the screens. Anger, certainly, a touch of cold amusement. What a fine trick to play, like the guards allowing him to steal the motorcycle. But something else too. Curiosity. And that's enough to hope.

She breathes into the microphone that speaks directly into the King's ear. *I am here*, she confirms. *In the palace. Let's talk. Like people.*

Inshallah.

THE END

This short story is loosely inspired by present-day Morocco, its free programming schools and recent protests, but set in the near future in an alternate universe, with a different royal family and government that does not reflect the current regime. Special thanks to the Moroccan and Egyptian activists I spoke to who did authenticity and sensitivity reads and provided critical context.



SANKOFA

MUTHI NHLEMA

Sankofa

BY MUTHI NHLEMA

“...but I am in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive.”
James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village”, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955)

-THE NARROWS-

A lit match.

Seeing her felt like that. Watching a match light up a room that had grown so accustomed to the grey it knew no other colour. I don't remember believing much in anything before. Not in any imported gods or ancestors whose great deeds died with them, buried and forgotten. But I believed in her.

Or rather, she made me believe.

The first time I saw her, she was standing on an overturned water container underneath a smashed e-billboard in the market square outside the Old City, shouting like those doomsayers everyone ignores. She had a soiled bandana for a necklace, I think it was red—or was it maroon? I forget. The white bird printed on it had faded. The white ink had cracked along the bird's spine. One wing almost gone, but the outline still held.

Why she clung to that thing I will never understand, but it was hers and it became her, the way a thing takes on the essence of its owner. I can't picture her without it now.

I can't picture it without her.

I stood near the back of the onlooking crowd, mostly roughneck vendors with their stale wares, and wandering youth with idle hands that often slipped into innocent pockets. Many listened with their arms crossed and their mouths curved in that familiar way that said they would not be fooled again. I knew that posture; I had worn it myself many times before, folded arms and pretended distance. Our bodies had memorised that posture after years of grand speeches by men-in-suits with honey-tongues standing on platforms peddling dreams.

How was she any different?

"Ahi! Don't waste our time," hissed one. "Just join us, the forgettables!"

"Someone wife her so she shuts up," shouted another, drawing applause from the laughing crowd.

A soft clap whispered through my palms. If I am being honest, I clapped less out of solidarity and more because I did not want anyone to notice me as the only man who had not. That was the kind of man I was then. Just one of many in a crowd. Safe in the blur of dark faces.

Ordinary.

Forgettable.

Alone.

The crowd did not let up, the heckles and jeers kept coming. And yet, to my surprise, instead of accepting her place among us, the forgettables, she clung to that

overturned water container, shouting her message. Eyes wide with a passion wasted on this crowd.

It was her eyes that drew me in. They felt misplaced in that market square, among us who had been broken into believing that hope was more dangerous than death. And hope lived in those eyes. A stubborn hope in a hopeless place.

Foolish.

Naïve.

Different.

I wondered what that felt like. To hope like that. To speak to us as if we were still a people who mattered. A people who could not be ignored. A people with something left to lose.

“Remember, it belongs to us,” she said, her arms sweeping over the crowd. “Orunite belongs to us!”

Orunite. I had heard about it, but paid it little interest. Mostly because it felt like something meant for big people. People in suits. People with means. People with names. Not me. Not us in this market square. Orunite. The miracle mineral that would free the world from its old carbon sins, which had burned the skies. Fervent believers called it the god mineral. Traditionalists, the sun rock. Me, what did it matter? The men-in-suits claimed that a large deposit, large enough to last generations, had been discovered along the entire stretch of our coastline.

No more blackouts, they said. *No need for fossil fuels,* they promised.

Ah! Awam! The lot of them! Selling us promises they had already stolen!

News of the mineral sat on every tongue; I could not escape. State radio. Pirated eye-screens. The rundown shebeen where old drunks went hunting for new gossip. One day, they said a gram could power a small house—no need for solar cells. A few days later, a city. Rumour blurred into fact. Fact was dismissed as fiction. The more fantastical the gossip, the more people believed it.

Or rather, wanted to believe it. Believe? *Ah!* Plenty of that to go around. Trans-human doomsayers, minaret charlatans and the old-time Jesus freaks. All the same to me, just men in different suits, wanting us on our knees deeper in the slick mud.

They all keep on peddling.

And people keep on believing.

Pick your poison.

A humming sound whooshed above us. The hovercopters came over low and sudden, slicing through the smog. I could have sworn I saw the blue of the sky peering through the grey-brown haze. Their mechanical hum pressed down on us before anyone looked up.

More and more of them since the mineral was discovered. Everyone had noticed, but nobody said much about it. Rumours had it they were carrying Global Government liaisons to meetings with our men-in-suits. Preliminary talks or something,

those in the know called them, although they never could say what was “preliminary” about them. I’m sure they did not know what “preliminary” meant. The hovercopters vanished towards the Old City, leaving behind a silence in the crowd.

She looked up at the hovercopters, waiting for their hum to pass before she continued. “You see them,” she said. Not a question.

“This is how it begins. First, friendship. Then, our compromise.” She paused. “And then one morning you wake up and you are still in the same place you have always been, but somehow it no longer belongs to you. Remember your history. This is how it begins. Like the first time they came. This is all it has ever been.”

Folded arms. Curved lips. The crowd stirred quietly back to the familiar. A few walked off before she had finished speaking. I did not move. I couldn’t tell you what held me in place. But I watched her, still.

Standing there.

Her eyes.

She looked at us as if she had already forgiven us once for some betrayal, and would not do it again.

“I know what I sound like to you,” her voice carried above the murmur. “I know what this looks like. Another person on a container telling you that things will change.”

Her stare swept over the crowd.

“But they are going to take it. And when they do, they will use our own hunger to justify it. They will say we needed them. They will say we asked for it. Remember that!”

She pulled the bandana up over her mouth, revealing the cracked white print of the Sankofa bird. The one from the stories. Its neck curved back toward its body in that impossible arc, like it was breaking the bird apart. She stepped down off the container and melted into the crowd.

No crescendo.

No raised fist.

Gone.

Within minutes, the square looked as it always did. Stale wares. Idle hands. The smashed e-billboard dark and dead above the empty container. Life, or what passed for it, drained back to normal.

As if she had never been there.

I walked home through the Narrows. Thin concrete lanes connecting the market square to the residential quarter, upper floors leaning together overhead, the smogged sky appearing only in strips. In rain, it flooded to the ankle. In heat, it held the day’s temperature and gave it back slowly through the night.

The Narrows was sweating that night.

The next day, and every day after that, I started taking that route. Past the market square. Under the smashed e-billboard. It was not on my way. But after that afternoon, I rerouted my entire life around the possibility of seeing her again.

She was never there.

Day after day, the square was empty of her, and still I came back, drawn by something I did not want to name.

Not yet.

*

The e-billboard came on the morning after a faulty power cell exploded in the Narrows. The fourth that week. Poor handling, probably. Knock-off brands, most likely. A week without an incident had come to feel strange. I had never seen the e-billboard light up until that morning, when it came alive, drawing the attention of the regulars.

The e-billboard stuttered once, twice, then settled. A figure appeared, standing in the clean white space, groomed in a way that life in the Narrows could not afford. The figure seemed faceless, at first. And then, I recognised him.

He was.

Me.

Only, those were not my eyes.

This was a version of me, the version the e-billboard wanted me to see. The version I could become. The crowd stirred into murmurs of recognition. No. More like longing. Each seeing themselves reflected back on the e-billboard. Behind the figure, behind me, buildings appeared, climbing higher and higher into bright white sky. Street lights gleamed. Water flowed clean and bright. Laughter of playing children could be heard. The figure opened its mouth and spoke in my own voice.

Debt Relief Guaranteed. Stewardship is Partnership. Your Future Starts Today.

Then a turquoise stone appeared in his—my—hand. *Orunite*. It caught the light in an unnatural way. Almost alien.

Progress is our Promise, I said to me, standing there with my own face promising me a life I never believed was mine to have. Then the images looped again. The slogans came around again. And again. And again.

People kept watching until that familiar posture of curved lips and folded arms was gone.

*

She came back the next morning. Red bandana around her neck, still. I stood closer to the front to catch a glimpse of her. She was smaller than her words made her out to be.

A large crowd gathered around the e-billboard, larger than the one the previous day. Some regulars, many new. Word of the e-billboard had spread overnight. She stood below it. Its screen was still live. Still looping.

She did not look at it. She looked out at them. At us. All those faces. Turquoise and white from the billboard's light.

"You see," she started, her voice carrying further this time. The murmurs died down.

"Stewardship," she said. "That is what they are calling it. Stewardship. As if we are children who cannot be trusted."

"But can we be trusted?" A man, close to the front of the crowd. A winnowing basket of dust-covered oily snacks at his feet. There was no anger in his voice. He sounded like someone ready to unburden himself of a long-held secret. "Nothing works anymore. Not lights. Not water. We have had no water in this square for four years. Four years!"

Whispers moved through the crowd. Agreement. Hard to say.

"They promised debt relief," another said from somewhere behind me. "Jobs. Real jobs. Not the kind that disappear."

"They promised," she replied. "Yes. At what price? What is the price of that promise? Do you even know?"

The whispers thinned to silence.

"Nothing comes without a price," she said. "Ask yourself what they want in return."

"Development," the man with the basket said. "That's what they want to give us."

"They want the mineral," she said. "That is what they want. Everything else—the lights, the water, the debt relief, the jobs—it is all theatre. Once they have the Orunite harvesting concessions, once their machines are built on our coastline, we will never see a cent of what comes out of the ground."

"And who benefits now?" someone called out. No hostility. Genuinely asking. "Who benefits right now, today, before they came? Us? We benefit?"

More mutters. Agreement. Reluctant, but there.

"Stewardship," she said again, quieter this time. "It starts with managing our affairs. They will say we are not ready. They will say we need their guidance. They will bring in their own people to run their machines on our land. And you will be grateful. Because the lights will come on and the water will stay clean. And before anyone notices, we will have handed over everything. All in the name of progress."

A long pause.

Then, from the back of the crowd, a voice I had not heard before. Older. Tired in a way that had made peace with itself.

"So what if they come and take over? We failed to manage things ourselves. Maybe this was always going to happen. Let them come. At least our children will eat."

The silence felt longer. Deeper. Nobody answered.

Not even her.

She stood there. The words hanging in the air between her and the crowd. Then, her face. Something crossed her face that was not defeat, not even anger. Something more final than either.

She bent down.

She picked up a piece of broken paving at her feet, where the concrete had been crumbling for years. She turned it in her hand once, twice, looked up at the e-billboard.

With a scream that tore through the square, she hurled it at the e-billboard. The square went still. The broken piece of paving caught the breath out of our lungs before it connected with the screen.

The screen cracked, but the image kept looping through it. She picked another chunk of concrete as we all looked on. Spellbound and confused.

She flung the second piece with the same intensity as the first. The screen shattered into a spiderweb of cracks and went dark. Fragments of glass exploded from the screen and rained down on the broken pavement below.

Her madness spread. The crowd had been waiting for permission to release their own demons. There was one. Then another. Then many. One by one, pieces of paving flew through the air at the e-billboard. One punched a hole through the screen. Bursts of electric sparks. Glass everywhere.

Chaos.

That was when I noticed them.

Two men. Ordinary clothes, nothing that announced itself. They were standing up front a few steps away from me. Around them, the square was a press of colliding bodies. People throwing paving stones, others trying to stop them throwing. But those men. They were completely still. They were rocks in a rolling ocean, unfazed by what was happening around them. It was the stillness that announced that they were not of this place. Not of the Narrows. And then they moved. They moved towards the e-billboard, through the mild inconvenience of the crowd. Slow. Certain. Their eyes were narrowed to a single focus.

Her.

A flush of adrenalin heightened my senses. My body moved before my mind understood why. I pushed through the crowd towards her, and grabbed her arm. She had a stone in her other hand, raised and ready to throw. She tried to push me away, but I pulled anyway.

"Come," I said, not waiting for her to reply.

My body manoeuvred by memory. We went sideways into the crowd, into the press of bodies already scattering, into the lanes the square had been using to breathe. Before we vanished down the lane, I turned and looked over my shoulder.

The two men were still there under the shattered screen, moving through the crowd, searching. She was shouting something. I don't remember what it was, nor could I hear her over the fray. She followed my gaze and I felt her arm loosen in my grip. After that, all I remember was that I kept pulling.

We kept running.

And the crowd sealed around us.

*

The flood of people down the Narrows had reduced to a trickle by the time we stopped.

I was bent over, hands on my knees, breathing hard. Sweat ran down the sides of my face and into my mouth. The sweet taste of salt tickled my tongue. My legs were buckled bamboos about to break.

But her. A single line of sweat ran down her forehead, the only sign she was human. She was not breathing hard. She stood over me, looking down at me, and said, "Thank you. But I can look after myself."

Then she turned and walked deeper into the Narrows, away from me, into the darker sections where the light from above came in strips.

I watched her go. She did not look back.

And as she moved away from me, the bandana around her neck caught what little light there was, and I saw it clearly for the first time. The bandana was not red. It was maroon—faded maroon.

*

Something had shifted in the Narrows that day. Something had shifted in me. I could not name it. But I felt it.

Not loudly. Not all at once. Slowly at first, and then suddenly. The way the grey-white clouds shifted before the smog came. You looked away for a moment, and the sky had already changed colour. That's what she did to us.

To me.

People who had not been in the square that morning had heard about it by evening. By the next day, the story had grown. The paving piece became a boulder. The crowd became a mob. The shattered screen had been toppled with a single stone.

None of it was exactly true, but what did it matter?

Her name moved through the Narrows and lingered on every tongue, until it became larger than the person it belonged to.

Leymah, the daughter of the soil.

Leymah, the brave.

Leymah, the troublemaker.

She is one of us, some said. She is fighting for what belongs to us while the rest of us are too afraid to stand up.

Others said, How do we know the Global Government is any different from the men-in-suits? They are all the same. She is the only one saying it out loud.

And others said, she is breaking things that were already broken. She will bring trouble down on all of us and disappear when it arrives.

While the Narrows stirred with rumour, they came at night.

Strange men in strange uniforms with the insignia of a double “g” in an endless loop on the breast pocket. Nobody in the Narrows had seen that insignia up close before, but it was easy to speculate. Global Government. A few people watched from their doorways as the crew worked under portable floodlights that turned night into day, dismantling what remained of the old screen. Silent and efficient. They did not speak.

By morning they were gone, and the e-billboard was back on.

The loop returned. The turquoise mineral revolving. The clean slogans. The versions of ourselves we could become. But this time there was something new in the loop. A figure. A woman. Her face was pixelated. Blurred. But we all knew. Words flashed above her head.

Enemy of Progress.

Enemy of Your Future.

Enemy of Your Community.

Everyone knew who it was, but the Narrows protected their own.

The next day, the streetlights came back on, and stayed on.

*

A knock on my door. An empty lane. A folded note at my feet.

A meeting place.

The meeting place was a storage room behind an old shebeen several lanes deep into the Narrows. The room smelled of stale oil and the fermented grain of the previous night's brew. A draught stole its way into the room. A single light source, a battery lantern set on the floor, threw long shadows up the walls. There were five of us. Leymah. An old man whose name I never learned, didn't care to know. It was better that way. He sat with his hands on his knees and said very little. A young woman who sold recycled solar cells from a cart near the square. A boy, a teenager, who stood near the door. I couldn't tell if he was on look-out, or he just hadn't decided whether he was staying.

And me.

She stood at the front with the maroon bandana pulled up over her mouth, the faded Sankofa bird pressing over her lips. Around the room, others had done the same, strips of red cloth knotted at their necks and covering the lower half of their

faces. The boy gave me mine at the door and I followed suit, wrapping it loosely around my neck. Hers was the only one with the bird.

She said we had been chosen.

She said it quietly, the way people said things that didn't need explanation. She said there were eyes and ears of the Global Government everywhere looking for her, that she could not do this alone, that she had watched each of us long enough to know we could be trusted with what had to be done. With what had to come next. She said our names would be remembered. Us. The forgettables. I looked around the room and wondered if any of them—the old man, the young woman, the boy at the door—believed that. I wondered if I believed it. I knew why I was there, and it had nothing to do with being remembered. It had everything to do with being wanted. Being needed. Mattering to her.

She motioned us closer to the battery lantern. We leant in until our wall shadows shrank to nameless shapes. I sat across from her. This was the closest I had been to her since that day in the square. Just a battery lantern between us, and the strangers around it. She spread her stare between us as she spoke. Like I was just one of the others here. Whenever her stare came my way, I caught a rim of light in her narrowed eyes. Only for a moment.

We listened as she laid out her plan.

Sabotage.

She wanted to make it harder for the Narrows to settle into the comfort of the Global Government's promises before they understood what they were giving up. What they were losing.

"How?" the boy said.

"Everything they put up, we bring down. Lights. Water. Anything."

"They'll just fix it again," the young woman said. "Like the billboard. They fixed that."

Leymah looked at her. "Yes, but do you remember what happened? When I threw that first stone?"

"Yes."

"Did I ask anyone to join me?"

Silence. The old man's knees cracked as he shifted his weight. Old men with old bones. The lantern threw his shadow long and thin against the wall.

"The Narrows joined me because they understood something the men-in-suits have forgotten. You cannot buy people who know what is being taken from them. The men-in-suits signed away our birthright for villas in Nusantara, and they think we can be bought. The Narrows will not do that. I know it. The people will stand with us." She paused. "Why do you think they have spies in the Narrows? Power understands. Power knows. Power does not fear damage. Power fears the people who

are no longer afraid to cause it. Every stone thrown is an act of resistance. And when the Narrows sees that, they will throw their own stones.”

The young woman nodded. Not convinced. Considering, maybe.

“And if it doesn’t work?” the old man said.

“It will work,” Leymah said. “It must.” She looked around the room. Her eyes, searching, catching each stare in turn. Looking past the surface of things, into the hidden parts of us. Parts no one was meant to see. Not even her.

“I would rather be hungry and belong to myself than fed and belong to them,” she said.

Nobody spoke. That was agreement enough.

“Then it begins tonight,” she said.

We followed.

*

That first night, masked in red bandanas, we took out the streetlights in the lanes around the square.

It was easy. We cut out the wiring and a familiar darkness returned to the square. The old man and boy kept watch. The young woman moved with such quiet lightness, from streetlight to streetlight, that she surprised me. Leymah handled the blade that severed the wiring.

My job was the neon-spray.

I had a canister of red neon paint and a stencil she had cut out herself. The Sankofa bird, its neck curved back in that impossible arc. I pressed the stencil to the wall beneath the first broken fitting and sprayed from the feet upwards. The image screamed neon-red against the grey of the cracked concrete wall. Smooth outline with runs of red paint at the feet.

Our symbol.

Her symbol.

Whistle. Couldn’t tell if it was the old man or the boy. Someone was coming. We became shadows in the darkness as we scattered into the Narrows. I could hear my heart in my ears.

I had never felt as alive as I did that night.

By morning, the Sankofa bird was still on the wall. The streetlights were back on.

*

The days blurred into each other after that.

We met. We planned. Or rather, she planned. We followed. We went out in the dark and broke what we could. Lights again. Water. Then lights again. Each time, the repair came before we woke up. Each time faster than the last, like nothing had

happened. Like we hadn't happened. Each time, I walked past the bird on my way through the square.

Still there, untouched.

*

Rumours travelled through the Narrows. Quicker than usual.

Stewardship information kiosks had opened in other settlements around the Old City. Jobs. Real ones, people said. Not the kind that disappeared after the first pay cycle or a single day's wage. The kind that stayed. The kind that paid. More than enough work at the Orunite harvesting site along the coastline, people claimed. So much so they had to import labour from neighbouring countries. People from other settlements had already signed contracts. People from the hills above the Old City. Whole families even.

Then the e-billboard settled it. The same loop. The same turquoise mineral. The same smiling faces. Children laughing. Except now, there were queues. Endless queues of people coming out of kiosks with contracts in hand. Everyone saw themselves on the screen. I knew what they were seeing. I did not look up. I did not want to see myself smiling back at me.

Instead, I looked at the bird. Neon-red on the wall.

Still there.

But a wind was changing. The murmurs in the Narrows were no longer about the bird. No longer about her. The Narrows protected its own. That was true. That had always been true.

But the Narrows also had children to feed.

*

The queue finally came to the Narrows.

It stretched from the kiosk in the square down the second lane and around the corner. I walked past on the other side, hoping I wouldn't attract attention. I had checked that the red bandana was tucked deep in my pocket that morning. But seeing the queue, my hand dug into my pocket and pressed it deeper.

I didn't want to understand why.

That was when I saw them.

The teenage boy. The young woman. In the queue, their red cloths gone from their necks. Waiting their turn.

The boy saw me first. A moment held between us. Then he looked away. Back to the kiosk. The young woman's eyes found me next, held for less than a moment. Then she too looked away.

There was something in their eyes.

Not shame.

Not indifference.

I don't have the word for it. It was the look of people who expected me to understand why they had to look away from me. From her.

I kept on walking, hands in my pocket. Squeezing the bandana.

*

The meeting room shrank around her. Just three of us. The old man between me and her.

We waited in the dim light. The battery lantern was running low on juice. She did not want to charge it using the Global Government's electricity. She didn't have to explain why. The empty spaces where they—the boy and the woman—would have sat took up more room around the light. I ignored them. If I looked at them for too long, they would become real. Those empty spaces. And I could not make them real. Because making them real would be a betrayal. Of everything. Of this.

Of her.

Then Leymah looked at me.

"The boy," she said, breaking the silence. "The woman. Did you see them on your way here?"

I did not look at her. But I should have.

"No," I said. "I haven't seen them." I could feel her eyes settle on me longer than usual. Then she looked away toward the dimming light, our shadows pooling at our feet.

She said nothing. We all said nothing.

We sat in the dimming light, waiting.

*

The Narrows started quaking. A little at first. Then more and more. I heard it before I saw it. A low mechanical thrum above us. Different from the hovercopters. Heavier.

It was mid-morning, yet the strip of sky between the leaning buildings eclipsed into dark as the sound passed over us. I followed it, curious. The dying bars of skylight between the buildings were my only guide through the lanes. I arrived in a crowded square of onlookers, my eyes meeting the smog-thick sky, and saw the source of the sound.

Cargo drones. Four of them. Larger than anything I had words for. Their underbellies were flat and wide, casting shadows over the square like it was an early dusk. Sections of machinery suspended beneath each one on thick steel cables. They moved in close formation toward the coastline of the Old City. Unhurried. Indiffer-

ent to the lanes, like some god who had no time for his creation. We must have been ants from up there. Ants that could be stepped on.

That night, the e-billboard replaced rumour. The Harvester would be operational within days. Assembly had already begun. The Narrows watched this announcement loop countless times before the murmurs started. Not the murmurs of resistance. Something different. Something...

The Narrows will not do that.

I could not admit...

The people will stand with us.

....to myself.

I would rather be hungry and belong to myself than fed and belong to them.

The Narrows belonged to them now.

*

Reflected light in my eye. He was there.

Standing in front of the Sankofa bird, the one I had sprayed that first night. Now beneath a repaired streetlight. He was wearing a grey uniform, Global Government embroidered insignia on the left breast. The insignia caught the light as he stroked with the brush in his hands and bucket of paint at his feet.

Black paint.

The old man.

Old man with old bones.

He worked slowly, carefully, covering the bird from top to bottom. Not missing a spot. The neon-red disappeared under the long strokes of black. He painted with the attention of a man who had found his place and had made his peace with it.

He did not look up. I was glad he didn't. I could not bear looking into his eyes and seeing what was there. I stood by and watched until the bird was gone, like it was never there. Like I was never here.

Like she...

I turned away and went to find her.

*

The battery lantern was dead. It was just the two of us now.

The only light in the room came from under the door. A thin line of streetlight from the lane outside. Pale, but enough to make out her outline. She was standing, two bags at her feet.

She did not speak when I came in. No ceremony. She just bent down, picked up one of the bags, and threw it at me in one impatient motion. I caught it clumsily, the bag almost falling from my hands. From inside came the unmistakable sound of

spray cans knocking against each other, and beneath them the flex of the stencil. I knew the shape of it without seeing it.

I held the bag and looked at her outline in the thin light. Waiting to listen. Waiting to follow.

She picked up the second bag and pulled the strap over her shoulder. It sat differently, heavier on one side.

"Let's go," she said. I did not ask where. I already knew. It could only be there.

She moved to the door, out into the lane, into the streetlight and into the night that was waiting for her away from the Narrows. Beyond the Narrows.

I wrapped my red bandana around my neck, and followed her.

2126

-ARKOPOLIS-

The mind-space took the form of a grey room. A compliant grey. The grey of conditioning.

Clearly, a mind that had learned to present itself without shape, without shadow. The Auditor had been inside many, enough to know the difference between each state of mind. A fearful mind built elaborate architecture. Endless corridors. Locked doors. Rooms within rooms. A guilty mind, clutter. A compliant mind, this. Four empty walls. A floor. A ceiling. Ordinary. Nothing that could be misread as deviant. Subversive. But sometimes, things slipped through. Phrases. Thoughts.

Hallucinations. They always did, especially lately.

He pressed his palm flat against the walls, his thumb stroking up and down. Smooth. Dense. The surface held. Good.

A well-maintained mind.

The spinal pod, placed at the top of his spine, glowed in two-second pulses of iridescent blue. The colour of surveillance. The colour of his profession.

His vocation.

He could never tell whether he had chosen this profession or it had chosen him. That thought surfaced sometimes, just beneath the conditioning. Always there, but out of his reach. He had stopped trying to answer it, and focused on his function. To audit. To audit was to protect, and he had become adept at it. That was all that mattered.

He continued moving along the wall, one hand trailing its surface. Listening. Feeling for what lay behind the grey. If there was something, anything, he would find it. He always did.

In the centre of the room, a figure stood motionless, in a grey jumpsuit. The Machinist.

His self-image had not yet fully rendered on the faceless head, a common delay when the audit was sudden, like this one. A face that had taken form too quickly was a face that had been prepared. The less prepared, the better. The spinal pod on the Machinist's back pulsed rapidly, green to red and settled on iridescent blue, as the mind download was in progress. The blank oval of the Machinist's head pixelated once, twice, and then resolved into features. Eyes. Nose. Mouth. A man, clean-shaven, with a neutral face that had forgotten emotion. A working man with working hands. A conditioned man. A compliant man.

Almost reflexively, he lowered his head and clasped his hands behind his back, hands gripping the elbows. A soldier awaiting orders.

The Auditor continued, palm pressed to the wall, circling the room. Their spinal pods pulsed in synchronised resonance, the blue washing the grey walls.

"State your function," the Auditor said.

"North extraction line. Third belt maintenance," the Machinist replied.

"State your last assigned task."

"Pressure diagnostic. Valve cluster seven. Secondary Orunite feed."

The Auditor's hand pressed harder against the wall as the Machinist spoke. Smooth. Stable.

Good.

"State the date of your last full maintenance cycle."

"Fourteen days ago. Logged and submitted."

"State your hours on the fourteenth."

"Standard rotation. Six to eighteen. Break at midday."

"Who spoke to you on the fourteenth?"

"Floor lead. At rotation start. Standard briefing."

"Anyone else?"

"No."

"Anyone else?" the Auditor repeated.

"No."

The wall was still smooth. Still dense. Still stable. Good. The Auditor moved further along.

"What did you hear on the fourteenth that was not machine noise?"

A pause. The Machinist rolled his shoulders, slightly opening his chest.

"Machinist?"

"Standard alarm. Midday bell. Floor lead."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing else."

The Auditor felt something catch under his fingers. A scratch. Subtle. Almost unnoticeable.

Almost.

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing else."

There it was again. A tremor behind the wall. He kept walking, not changing his pace, in case he gave the game away. He pressed two fingers more firmly against the surface, and felt it again. A seam. Micron thin. Running vertically from somewhere near the ceiling, hidden under the grey. A secret fault-line. Interesting.

He kept circling, only this time he observed the Machinist out of the corner of his eye.

"What did you see on the fourteenth that was not part of your assigned environment?"

"Machine readouts. Floor lead. Standard equipment."

"Nothing else."

"Nothing else."

Another pass of the seam. Wider now under his fingers, or perhaps he was pressing harder. He had to be certain before passing judgement. The wall began to flex under pressure. The texture of the wall changed here, the smooth giving way to something spongelike. Something moist.

"Any unapproved phrase?"

"No."

"Any unauthorised memory?"

"No."

"Any hallucination?"

The Machinist's head stayed down. His hands tightened behind his back, nails digging into artificial skin.

"No."

The Auditor lifted his hand from the wall and turned to face the Machinist directly. He crossed the grey floor. The Machinist's frame had folded slightly inward, a barely perceptible crouching, as if something in his mid-region had contracted without permission.

"Look at me," he said.

The Machinist did not move. Only his breathing punctuated the silence that hung in the air.

"Look at me."

His clean-shaven head lifted slowly. Cautiously. His eyes were closed.

"Open your eyes," the Auditor said.

The muscles at his jaw worked once and set tight.

Non-compliant.

“Open your eyes.”

The compliance posture wavered into the posture of a man holding something back.

Non-compliant.

“Open your eyes,” the Auditor said.

“I don’t see her,” the Machinist said, his voice thinning to a whisper. “I have not seen her.”

“Open your eyes.”

The temperature in the room shifted. Ambient, but now cooling. Goose pimples sprouted on the Auditor’s skin as the shift passed through him from the floor upward.

The Machinist opened his eyes. In the right iris, something moved.

There it was. Small. Red. Bird-shaped. Floating in the liquid dark of the eye like a malformed embryo. It was the mark.

The hallucination.

The Machinist began to scream at the ceiling. No sound came out.

Behind the Auditor, the wall split and cracked open. A clean decisive crack, running floor to ceiling along the seam he had found. Then the first ribbon of black tar, thick and slow, seeped through the crack and found the corners of the room, pooling up to their ankles. Another crack opened to his left. Then another behind the Machinist. The grey room was coming apart at its hidden seams, the black tar of an unstable subconscious seeping in. Suppressed memories shrouded in the dark beneath the grey compliance.

“She lives!” the Machinist screamed, his voice crackling with almost inhuman timbre. “She lives!”

The floor began to separate.

The Auditor felt the section beneath his feet tilt and give. He lunged toward the Machinist, but the floor opened first, a clean split, and he fell through, down into the density of the subconscious. Not space. Not darkness. Just infinite density. Black matter pressing on him from all sides.

A broken piece of the grey room hung suspended above the dark. The Machinist stood on it, his body bending in grotesque contortions, something inside fighting to get out. His eyes were burning unnaturally red, the mark at the centre of each iris. Hair sprouted from his scalp in slow dark spikes, short one second and long the next. Another face seemed to bleed through his face, blurred at the edges, almost forming, then breaking apart.

The black tar was now around the Auditor’s shoulders. He could exit. The thin thread of connection back to the real world was still open. He just had to tap the spinal pod at the back of his neck and he would be gone in less than a nanosecond.

He could do that even now. He did not.

Not yet.

Above him, the Machinist's face continued blurring and breaking, something beneath still trying to push through. He had never seen it fully formed. That face. He would usually exit the mind-space before it formed fully. Protocol required it. Prolonged exposure to the hallucination risked contaminating the Auditor's mind-space. The rules were clear. To audit is to protect. He knew the rules.

But he needed to see it. He needed to know.

The tar was higher now. Neck and rising. He waited.

The hallucination's face was closer to setting, closer than he had ever allowed himself to see.

Nearly there.

The tar reached his chin. He waited.

The hair was a spiked crown of chaos around its head. The Machinist's face was almost gone. The hallucination's features hardened.

Nearly there.

The tar just below his nose. He waited.

A woman's face. He had never seen her before.

She lives!

She opened her mouth, teeth streaked with lines of black tar, and screamed one word into the endlessness:

"Sankofa!"

She lives!

The Auditor reached for the spinal pod and tapped.

*

The Auditor fell to his knees as he came back into himself.

The whiff of processed Orunite met his flared nostrils. The world spiralled around him in blurs of flashing lights and misshapen figures. His breathing was loud and heavy. The pulse of his spinal pod had quickened, out of sync, out of rhythm, out of colour.

He squeezed his eyes shut and began the manual recalibration. Deep breaths, four counts in, four counts out, until the spinal pod's rhythm stabilised back to his baseline. Four-second pulses, out of sync, red. Three-second pulses, in sync, blue. Two-second pulses, all in blue unison. His mind was steady again. His breathing under control. His baseline recalibrated.

He pushed the palm of his hand into the ground. Hard composite. Metallic and cold. The churning of metal on metal reached his ears. A processing unit somewhere nearby. He opened his eyes. The spinning world slowed down into regular shapes and familiar figures. Orunite workers. Machinery. The platform.

A clear blue sky.

Around him, work on the platform continued without pause. Workers moved along their routes, carrying equipment, logging pressure readings, checking valve clusters, exchanging short transactional words: a shift in progress. The machinery did not stop. The conveyor lines did not slow. A worker passed within arm's length of the Machinist, eyes ahead, his route unchanged. Another crossed the platform in the opposite direction, earpiece in, head down. Nobody paused. Nobody looked up. Nobody acknowledged the Auditor because they knew. They all knew.

Knowing was exactly why they kept moving.

The Machinist was suspended between two rings, his feet a few inches off the floor, his arms hanging loose at his sides, his head tilted back toward the sky. His eyes were glazed. Lost in trance. His mind still downloading into his body.

The rings hovered in the air, one at chest height, one at the knees, enclosing him inside a cylindrical prison. The rings were industrial make, their outer hulls the grey-black of old machinery, studded with rectangular panels and vents along the circumference. From the inner rim of each ring, a wash of blue light throbbed outward, bathing the Machinist in a cold surveillance luminescence. The white of his eyes caught the blue. His face looked submerged.

The spinal pod at the Machinist's back pulsed rapidly between colours, blue, green, red, back to blue. Cycling, never settling. The download still running.

The Auditor rose to his feet and walked toward him.

As he did, the Machinist's head dropped forward. The spinal pod synchronised. His eyes opened and found the Auditor immediately, as if he had always known exactly where he would be. Their eyes locked. The platform of workers, the machinery, the field, none of it existed. Only the two of them, with one thing left to do.

The Auditor reached back, pressed the spinal pod at the base of his neck and held it.

"Initiate severance," he said, matter-of-factly.

It happened quickly. The blue light inside the rings shifted, a flicker, a switch, a moment between neither, and turned a violent shade of green. A decision had been taken. Now execution.

The Machinist's eyes widened.

"No," he whimpered, his voice coming back to him. "No. Don't. Please."

The spinal pod at the Machinist's back detached, unscrewing itself from the nerve point on his spine. His chest arched as a scream tore out of him, raw and primal. His hands shot to his head as if pulled there. His fingers dug hard against his temples as if trying to hold something in.

The rings ascended.

Slow at first, then with brutal certainty. The green of their inner rims brightened as they lifted, carrying the Machinist upward between them, his feet lifting even further off the floor, his body straightening in the invisible field between the rings.

"No," he continued, his voice laced with unashamed delirium. "No. No. Help me, please! Help me." He thrust his arms through the gap between the rings, clawing towards the passing workers, but they walked on without looking at him, as if he was not there.

The rings carried him off higher and higher, a speck against the expanse of an indifferent sky. The Auditor looked on with the air of someone completing some form of mundane administration.

The Machinist's voice thinned with distance. A sound without a word. A sound without a source. And then. Nothing.

The sky closed over him.

Audit complete. Good.

He crushed the detached spinal pod under his feet and walked off the platform.

*

He sat at his desk in the audit office. Narrow room. Pristine walls. Single window facing Arkopolis.

His holo-ledger hummed to life. A digital face hovering in mid-air.

"Audit report. Case number?" the digital face asked.

"1147-N."

"Incident type?"

"Mind-space instability. Subconscious contamination."

"Hallucination confirmed?"

"Confirmed."

"Severance administered?"

"Administered."

"Duration of mind-space entry?"

He paused. The spiked crown of chaos invaded his mind.

Eyes, red.

The mark, alive.

"Extended. Log under investigative observation."

"Reason for extension?"

She lives!

"Investigative purposes."

"Anything else to log?"

She lives!

Beyond the window, a fragment of Arkopolis caught the afternoon light, drawing his attention away from the holo-ledger.

He could not see the whole city from his chair. Only see a fraction, but that was enough. A tiered face of the city rose in curved terraces, threaded with living greenery spilling over the composite edges in controlled flourishes. Solar filaments ran

along the structural lines, pulsing faintly in the early blue of the afternoon. A maglev transit line curved through the mid-levels, silent and efficient, moving its cargo of workers and equipment to and from the extraction field. As his eyes followed the rise of the structure, the upper tiers disappeared into the pale mist, out of the frame of the window. He had never seen the rest of the structure, but when he allowed himself to wonder, which was not often, he imagined it was a remarkable sight.

“Anything else to log?”

The holo-ledger waited for him, blank and patient. He shrugged off his thoughts before they could settle.

He was good at that.

“Anything else to log?”

To audit is to protect.

Sankofa!

“No,” he said. “Nothing.”

“Report submitted for processing.”

The holo-ledger dimmed out of existence, leaving a fading afterimage in his eyes. He got up from his chair and walked to the window to follow the rise of the terraces into the moist haze beyond the window’s frame.

Reports usually took a few minutes to process before closing the ticket. He had never received a query on a filed report. Until now.

The query arrived in seconds on his holo-ledger, before he even reached the window.

STEWARD REQUESTS DEBRIEF. RE: SEVERANCE 1147-N. REPORT TO LEVEL NINE. IMMEDIATE.

He read it once. Level Nine. Top floor.

He read it again.

She lives.

He stood, straightened his posture, and walked to the lift.

She lives.

As he felt the gentle pull of gravity on his body, he noticed a light shiver in his hands.

-THE HARVESTER-

She pushed through the night like nothing else mattered. I followed her, into the water.

*

We waded through the shallows along the coastline, waters knee-deep. We ducked behind the rocks when the drone searchlights passed over us. Once they passed, she pushed through the water, bag tightly strapped to her back, heading toward the Harvester. She never waited for me, not even to check to see if I was still there. Three or four steps behind, bag of canisters slung over my shoulder. But I was there. I was always there.

And I think she knew it.

The drone searchlights outlined the extraction towers of the Harvester against the starless night sky. We were close. We emerged from the water and crouched on the shore. Our shoes were caked black with sand, mud and slime. I almost gagged at the smell, but it didn't slow her down. She ran across the sand, low and fast, to the treeline. I wanted to grab her arm, like I did in the square that day, and plead with her to wait for me.

I followed her, into the shadow of the treeline.

*

Underbrush. A perimeter fence, chain-link. Then, the Harvester.

The drone searchlights swept across the underbrush and sliced through the dark to somewhere above the Harvester's unfinished hull. She knelt, feeling for the red earth, her fingers tracing patterns in the soil. Her eyes stayed focused on the searchlights above. Tracing their patterns. It was the first time that night she stopped moving, staying still enough for me to feel the warm heat off her body. The drone searchlight passed, a second time. Her lips were moving. Only slightly. Nothing I could hear, but I recognised the shape of the words on her lips. She was counting. The searchlight passed over us again. A third time. Then a fourth.

She got the sequence.

She turned to me, the first time that night. "In three, head for the fence," she whispered. "Count to five in your head to get to the fence before the light." She didn't wait for my confirmation. She gave me the back of her head, raised three fingers and started the countdown.

Three fingers.

Two.

One.

We crawled through the underbrush like mambas. The countdown, real in my head. Heartbeat in my ears. My body, in flight.

Two.

One.

We reached the perimeter fence just as the searchlight swept our path through the underbrush, and stopped: hovering, combing.

The searchlight widened and crept closer to where we were. One of my legs was still outstretched in the underbrush, close to the approaching searchlight. Then, closer. Closer.

“Don’t,” she whispered. “Move.”

The searchlight reached my foot and held there. Two seconds. Three. Four.

The world started spinning. I forgot how to breathe. And yet, all I could think of—the only thing—was her. How disappointed she would be.

The light shrunk to its original width and moved on. Back to its sequence.

Air returned to my lungs. My eyes burned. I pulled my legs to my chest, wrapped my arms around my knees and rested my forehead on my forearms. The tension in my shoulders disappeared.

I thought I was better than them. The boy. The young woman. The old man. They abandoned her. And yet I was no better. Worse. I almost failed her. I thought I had failed her. I thought...

“Come on,” she said, on her knees over me. A hand squeezing my shoulder. Tender. Alien.

I looked up at her. She looked down at me. Her face was close to mine. My hand rested on hers before I even noticed.

She pulled away before the moment settled. I understood.

She reached into her bag, pulled out bolt cutters, and started cutting the chain link at the base of the perimeter fence. Wide enough for one person at a time. She went through first.

And I followed her, toward the Harvester.

*

No underbrush. Grass cut short. The space between the fence and the Harvester’s base was open. Exposed.

The sweep of the searchlight returned. We held at the fenceline. She was already checking the sequence. Confirming it. She counted under her breath. I joined her without realising it.

Two.

One.

Now.

Once the arc of searchlight crossed in front of us, we ran. Through the open ground toward the Harvester.

Five seconds.

Three.

Two.

One.

We slammed into the outer hull of the Harvester, breathing hard. The drone searchlights continued their sequence unchanged. We had not been seen.

The metallic hull was warm to the touch, releasing the day's heat. I could not gauge the size of it from this close. Only that it was large enough to push the night back on all sides. Large enough to swallow the sky. It was more wall than machine. A wall with a world behind it. A future inside it.

Our future. The Narrows' future.

A gentle clank. Sound of metal on metal.

She bent over her bag, opened it and started taking things out. I could not make out what.

I unslung my bag from my shoulder and took out the neon canisters. I shook the first one close to my ear. The rattling of the mixing ball inside comforted me. Maybe it was because it was a sound I knew, understood. A sound that held no secrets.

Metal on metal. Familiar.

That rattling was the sound of the night. The sound of red paint and stencils. The sound of a bird on the wall. The sound of sabotage. I pulled out the stencil, felt the outline of the bird in my hand, and pressed it against the wall of the outer hull. Just another wall to mark her bird.

I waited for the searchlight to pass. As it hummed past, locked in a sequence that held no more mystery, I began to spray.

A smell I did not recognise reached me. Something sweet. Chemical. Unnatural. It was coming from her.

I stopped spraying and turned to her. She was still hunched over, focused, her arms busy. I walked over to her and waited. The searchlight came around.

Power cells.

Two power cells, the knock-off brand types. Two dull brown cylindrical blocks, one at her feet covered in some dark orange clay. The other in her hands. She was still moulding the clay around it.

"What are you doing?" I said.

She paused, but did not look up at me.

"It's explosives," she said. She continued moulding the clay.

The searchlight was close. I looked at the neon canister still in my hand.

"I thought we came to—"

"I never said what we were coming here to do," she said, not waiting for me to finish. She turned to face me.

"I don't understand," I said.

"You have a choice now," she said.

The searchlight came around.

She had her red bandana over her mouth and a power cell in each hand, almost cradling them. Before we were plunged back into the shadow of the passing searchlight, she extended one power cell to me.

"How deep is your belief?" she said.

A fire burned behind her eyes.

2126

-LEVEL 9-

He looked at the digital counter on the panel as the gentle pull of gravity gradually let up. The lift was decelerating.

Level 7.

Level 8.

He had never been to Level 9 before, and did not know what to expect. A narrow room, maybe. Bleached white walls, perhaps. Antique furniture.

Level 9.

The lift doors opened. He clasped his hands behind his back.

The room spread outward from the lift. The entire front wall, concave in configuration, was a single unbroken pane of invisible panoramic glass overlooking Arkopolis. From this vantage point, he could see countless terraced megastructures, threaded with greenery, dotting the cityscape from one edge of the view to the other. A self-generated mist, a micro-climate, clung to the mid-tiers and climbed upwards, blanketing the upper tiers in grey-white mystery. Each terraced megastructure was connected by a complex lattice of transit lines, a geometry of efficiency and precision. The solar filaments gleamed more brilliantly in the afternoon blue than from his singular window. The jagged silhouettes of the extraction towers stacked the horizon in the distance. Ever-churning. Ever-present.

The room itself was wide and almost empty.

Almost.

The Steward stood to one side of the panoramic view, her back to him. She was a slender creature, clad in an off-white high-collared tunic layered over slim trousers with dark geometric patterns woven across the smooth texture. Her attire was elegant, but restrained. Understated, like power that did not require validation in fabric.

At the nape of her neck, just above the high collar, was a single spinal pod. Nothing like his. Three concentric circles formed its design, one inside the other, the

space between them pulsing inward and outward around the centre in breathing colours. Colours whose calibration were foreign to him. Beyond his pay grade.

Beyond his conditioning.

She raised three fingers and signalled him to approach.

Come in. He came.

Stop. He stopped.

Wait. He waited.

She was on a call. Her voice was low, almost nonchalant. He only caught fragments of the conversation.

"...I won't insult you by pretending I don't know why you called, Mr President..."

She paused, murmuring in agreement as she listened.

"...I'm flattered, but my role is to extract, process, and stabilise the global supply of Orunite. Talks of an Orunite-backed global currency are a political matter for member states. As I recall, the Republican States of America has yet to ratify the fossil fuel accords..."

Another pause. Longer than the last, fewer murmurs of agreement.

"...I know what that means for the Republican Dollar, but membership has a price..." She walked toward the center of the view, her stride casual. "You renounce fossil fuels, entirely. Shut down your derricks. Sign the accords. Only then will you have a seat at the table..."

She stopped in the middle of the vista.

"...You drafted terms like these for half the world once, Mr President. We didn't like them either."

The colour in the rings of her pod stopped breathing. The call was over.

She swung around and faced him. Her face was foreign, almost tawny. He could not quite place it. She observed him with a calm fascination.

"Come," she said, a smile cracking her thin lips. "I don't bite, despite what you may have heard."

Despite the outwardly warm invitation, he had heard enough about her to know that two or three steps closer was customary and adequate. He moved only slightly closer to her. She chuckled, spun and scanned the view outside, taking it in before she spoke again.

"Every time," she said. "Every time I stand here, I think I will get used to it." She paused. "Beautiful, don't you agree?"

The Auditor stood still, silence his only language.

"There was an old city here," she said. "Before the Arkopolis. You wouldn't know it now. Crime. Poverty. People used to live in narrow lanes back then." She paused, letting the words sit in the space between them. "Makes you wonder why anyone would want to live like that. Don't you think?"

"Steward," he said, his eyes fixed on a point beyond her.

She turned to look at him, more slowly this time. Her smile broke into a grin that lasted only a moment.

“Forgive me, Auditor,” she said. “Your conditioning does not permit indulgence.”

“To audit is to protect,” he said.

“Indeed,” she said, almost under her breath before pacing toward the centre of the room.

“Congratulations are in order,” she said, her tone formal. “Case *1147-N. The hallucination. You caught it.”

“To audit is to protect, Steward.”

“It is. Indeed, it is.” She was now pacing closer towards him. “Do you know how many times the hallucination has contaminated the shared mind-space?”

He had committed the answer to memory.

“Eight times, Steward.”

“Eight times,” she repeated. “Do you know how many of those eight times resulted in a confirmed catch?”

“Eight,” he said.

“Precisely. Eight.” She clapped her hands and tilted her head toward the ceiling as if searching for something. Some formulation that needed words to become real.

“Who was the catching Auditor in each of those cases?”

“Steward?” His brows knitted, breaking his mask of measured neutrality.

“Who was the catching Auditor in each of those cases?”

She waited. He said nothing.

“You,” she said, stopping in her stride. “Always you.” She turned her gaze to him, head tilted.

“Why is that, do you think?”

“I follow protocol,” he said. “To audit is to protect.”

“Yes, yes.” She waved a hand. “Other Auditors follow protocol. They are conditioned. Same as you. And yet.” She let the sentence hang between them.

“Don’t be nervous. This is not an audit. I just want to understand what makes you so,” her mouth curled into something that looked like curiosity, “special.”

He held her unblinking gaze. The clasp of his hands tightened behind his back. He said nothing.

She smiled slightly and gave her spinal pod one gentle tap. Her irises dissolved into a film of milky grey, her eyes glazing over.

His body tensed with a sharp shrug, unlocking the clasp behind his back. His spinal pod lit at once without his permission. The bright blue flashed into a colour that was beyond his conditioning. A colour he could not name, but understood. It was hers.

She was inside his mind, circling the edges of his spinal pod, like a predator. He pursed his lips, holding back a groan.

"Your report," she said as if speaking to herself. Her voice, echoing in his mind.

"Standard in every respect. Except."

A pause. Searching.

"Here. Investigative purposes."

Her milky grey gaze trained on him. "Expound."

He said nothing.

"Don't make me retrieve it myself, Auditor."

Her presence tightened. His spinal pod twisted sharply in his spine. Metal grinding against bone, scratching against nerves. A plume of pain mushroomed in his skull.

"Don't make me ask—"

"I stayed longer than protocol permits," he said through gritted teeth.

"Good," she said, her tone softening. "Expound."

"I needed to know what it was."

"What it was," she repeated. Her presence loosened its grip on his mind. "And what was it?"

"A woman," he said, his voice still strained.

She lives.

"A woman?"

"Yes, Steward. She was the hallucination."

She lives.

"Did she seem familiar to you?"

"No, Steward."

"Are you sure, Auditor?"

"Yes, Steward."

"What else?"

"She said something."

"Expound."

"I could not make out its meaning."

Sankofa!

"What was the word, Auditor?"

Sankofa!

"Sankofa," he said. He could not tell if the word came from his mouth or echoed up from somewhere deep in his mind. Deep where she could not reach.

"Ha!" she replied. "An old word from the old world. Before Arkopolis came to be."

"Yes, Steward."

Silence passed between them. Only for a moment.

Then his feet lifted off the ground. A few inches.

"You stayed longer than required by protocol. Do you deny this?"

She closed in.

"No, Steward," he said, his body suspended.

"Protocols exist for a reason, Auditor."

"Yes, Steward," he gasped, his eyes narrowing to hold her gaze.

To audit is to protect.

Did she just speak? Or was it his mind? He could not tell anymore.

"How do I know the hallucination has not corrupted your mind-space?"

She lives.

He said nothing because he already understood. He deserved what was coming.

Sankofa!

"What is the punishment for failing to follow audit protocol, Auditor?"

"Severance," he said, with the resignation of a man accepting his fate.

"Severance," she repeated, again almost to herself. "I could do that right now."

His breathing quickened. Ready for the inevitable.

"I could sever you," she said.

Ready for what was coming.

"Audit the auditor," she continued.

Ready.

Sankofa!

He shouldn't have waited.

*

His feet found the floor.

"Recover, Auditor," she said, turning away towards the glass, her back to him.

He felt nothing. Her presence had melted from his mind. The spinal pod twisted back, locked into place. He collected himself, steadied his breathing and stood up straight.

"I could sever you, but—" she turned to face him, her hands disappearing under the folds of her tunic. Her eyes had cleared. "That does not solve my hallucination problem."

He found the silence and held it.

"One thing is undeniable. You have a unique talent for catching this hallucination. A talent I can use. So, you are more useful to me connected than severed."

"Thank you, Steward."

She continued as if he had not spoken. "I'd like to believe that your insubordination was out of loyalty. A loyalty to Arkopolis. A loyalty to me. Correct?"

"Yes, Steward," he said without a second thought, a controlled devotion returning to his voice.

"How far are you willing to go, Auditor? For that loyalty?"

He paused before he spoke. "As far as protocol allows."

"What if I want you to go beyond the protocol? Beyond your conditioning?"

"Steward. Nothing is beyond the protocol."

"I am beyond your protocol, Auditor. Need I say more?"

He understood she did not expect an answer. Not to that anyway. As his mind lingered in the silence between them, he felt the grooves of the pod screws in his spine.

How far are you willing to go?

Without warning, she marched toward him. His leg muscles tightened, primed for flight. But although his frame swayed slightly, he did not dare move.

She stopped, dropped into an effortless squat and pressed her palm to the floor in the centre of the room.

Then she stepped back as the floor gave way in a rectangular outline, the edges brightening with a faint light. Her stare held the light. Eyeshine, in broad daylight. A platform rose soundlessly from the floor and pivoted in a slow rotation on its long axis until the underside faced the ceiling.

Held in place by metallic rods bolted to the platform's underside, a spine, a human spine, hung on display. A pod with a fibrous network of circuitry lined its vertebral length. The pod was still pulsing. Faint, but noticeable.

Pulse.

One

Two

Three

Four

Pulse.

Impossible, he thought as he walked closer to the spinal display, without invitation. The Steward looked on, smirking at his attempts at maintaining a mask of compliant indifference.

"This," he began. "This is."

"Impossible," she said. "For you, anyway. Your conditioning teaches you that a pod cannot pulse without being attached to a human body. To a consciousness."

He stood at the edge of the platform, almost arm's length from it, his entire being drawn to it.

"This was an earlier severance," she said. "I rebuilt the infected consciousness. One piece of code at a time."

"Why?" His forehead creased.

"The hallucination keeps evading our security protocols with each systems upgrade. So severance is insufficient," she said, placing her hands on the edge of the platform. "Then why not study it? Understand it."

He placed his hands on the platform, leaned in and inspected the spinal column, his eyes wrinkling with intense focus. Her words had receded. First, words. Then, letters. Finally, sound.

Only the spine remained. Only the spine mattered.

She paused, as if permitting him this one moment of private contemplation.

"I managed to isolate the source of the hallucination," she said, breaking his trance. "It's a memory. A residual consciousness."

"This," he said, finally finding words. "Goes against every clause of the audit protocol."

"It's off-space. No risk to shared mind-space," she said. "Only you and I know about this."

His attention pulled away from the spine, he looked at her sharply. An air of expectation softened her expression. He drew himself up, his spine returning to its line, put his hands behind his back, and assumed the customary stance.

He looked past her. At the sprawling cityscape of Arkopolis.

You have a unique talent for catching this hallucination.

"You know its signature better than any auditor."

A talent I can use.

"Which is why it has to be you. You have to sync with this residual consciousness."

How far are you willing to go for that loyalty?

"Study this hallucination. Understand it."

How far are you willing to go?

For a moment, he saw a small family of black birds, white wingtips and red throats, glide past the megastructures, and disappear into the micro-climate of the white mist.

As far as protocol allows.

She was beyond protocol.

2104

-THE HARVESTER-

She did not wait for an answer. Like she already knew.

My arms were stretched out before my words came. The power cell flew through the air towards me. I caught it. Felt its weight in my hands. My fingers dug into the clay. Some of it stuck under my nails.

How deep is your belief?

Her words were an afterglow, refusing to fade. Refusing to die.

A rasp. A tearing sound. A pocket opening.

She pulled something out of her pocket, something solid, something round, and lifted it against the night sky. Then, sounds I knew.

Beeps. Clicks. A recording orb. She lowered her hand and left the orb hovering at eye level between us. It cast a mild light on her, just enough to contour her face. The shadows seemed to melt from her in the light. I remained in the shadows of everything around me.

The Harvester.

The passing spotlight.

The hovering orb.

Her.

I watched her speak. Her eyes, fire-bright. The cracked print of the bird bulging in and out against her breath like a heartbeat. Her words came in rising whispers. Each word crisp and clear.

...they will say I was mad...

I knew those words. I knew their shape, their form. I carried them until there was no one else left to carry them. They were mine.

....they will say we were children...

Her words. My words.

Her light. My light.

Until all that was left were her words out of my mouth. Only her words. Always her words. Her words on the walls. Her words in the Narrows.

Nothing else, but.

...they will say we needed them...

Was there not a thing I owned that she had not given me first? My own words. My own light. Was it all her?

...that is how it always begins...

How deep was *my* belief? She did not even wait for my answer. She never waited. She moved on, the way she always did. As if the answer was never mine to give. Yet did I have one.

An answer.

...I did this for you...

And what of me?

I followed. Into the water. Into the dark.

Into this. Here.

Always steps ahead, and me behind. Always close, but never close enough to be seen. Never close enough to matter, to be remembered. Does she even remember seeing me, in that crowd the day I saved her? Or did her gaze pass over me, the same as everyone, the same as no one.

I am everyone to her.

And no one.

...remember this...

But I saved her. I saved her when her belief put her in danger. When she could have been taken from the square that day. Taken from the Narrows. From me. That was my hand on her arm. That was me pulling her through the crowd. Me, for once.

I gave her life back to her that day.

And now she wants to take mine.

No. Not for this. Not like this.

Not for her words. Not for her light.

Why not live for me as I lived for you?

...remember me...

Even the orb was for her. Her face. Her name. Her death made holy. A martyr.

And mine? What of my name? My face?

She will be remembered.

And I, a forgettable, never will be.

How deep is your belief?

I tucked my power cell under my armpit and reached for hers.

“What the hell are you doing?” she growled.

My free hand closed around her power cell, and I pulled. The cell almost slipped through her fingers, but she held on. She wrapped her arms around it, gripping and twisting with a strength I did not know she had. She glared at me, her eyes still burning with that fire. That bright fire. Only this time, for me.

This time, she saw me. Finally.

Neither of us was giving in. I wrapped my fingers further around the cell to create leverage, the clay slick under my fingers. She kept saying something. I don’t remember what. It didn’t matter anymore. I pulled again. The leverage worked. The cell was slipping out of her hands.

Then she drove her knee into my midsection. The air left my lungs, and I lost my grip. My legs buckled and I collapsed to my knees. The power cell under my armpit rolled away from me as I hit the ground. My eyes closing as the world started spinning.

By the time I came round, she was already at the Harvester. One power cell placed against the base of the hull. The other raised above her head, slamming it against the first.

CLANK!

First strike. Usually, it takes three or four.

I forced myself up, pain still throbbing across my midsection and lunged for her.

“Stop!”

My arms found her throat from behind, pulling her back, stopping her second strike. Her windpipe pressed against the muscles of my forearm. I was choking her.

"What about me?"

Another shot to my midsection. Her elbow this time. Harder. Sharper.

I stumbled backwards and hit the ground a second time. I howled as a blast of white light seared my eyes.

The searchlights. They had found us. Lit up against the hull of the Harvester.

CLANK!

I pulled myself up and turned away from the hull.

Away from her.

CLANK!

I ran across the clearing, light and shadow dancing around me.

CLANK!

Behind me, the slam of metal against metal.

And, a word screamed through the night. Her word. A new word.

"Coward!"

This time, she saw me.

I wanted to look back, but I didn't.

CLANK!

Then heat, at my back. A ball of fire hurled me through the air.

I flew straight into the perimeter fence.

The world went black.

2 1 2 6

- OFFSPACE-

There he was, downloaded into the off-space.

There were no rooms at the end of winding corridors behind locked doors. There was only space, murk fracturing and shattering into shards of nothing, drifting apart and recomposing themselves into more nothingness. He was suspended, buoyant, in the silent chasm of dark subconsciousness where thoughts used to take form and settle into memory. Now, all that remained was blackness, with no end and no beginning. No centre and no edge. Just him, adrift in the void.

Then, he saw it. Something in the distance.

A vortex.

A twisting column of debris slowly rotating upwards into the fracturing black, and yet untouched by it. A cloud of colliding detritus formed the widening girth

of its turbulent spiral. Every weightless fragment rose further upward and outward, away from the base of the vortex. Its eye. Its origin.

Its source.

That must be it. *The residual consciousness.*

He drifted toward the base of the twisting column. Fragments passed around him as he descended through the debris. He logged everything as he was conditioned to.

Jagged rocks, charcoal-black. A mangled mesh of chain-link wire. Pieces of broken metal. Then something else. An object, rotating too fast for him to quite make out what it was. He drifted closer and narrowed his eyes on the object. He knew what it was and logged it.

A human bone, likely from the forearm. He moved on.

As he neared the eye of the vortex, past the field of debris, buoyancy left his body and he plunged through the dark.

*

First, sound returned. Muted and distant, like an exhalation reaching for a crescendo it would never find. He opened his eyes. The twisting column of the vortex came into view above him. He rolled over and felt for his spinal pod.

Two.

One.

Pulse.

Intact and still pulsing.

He lifted himself up and scanned the surroundings. A clearing, low-cut grass. A metallic wall, pieces missing, likely a hull of some kind. A chain-link fence at the edge of the clearing.

The residual consciousness.

He had reached it. He was there, surrounded by the vortex of debris above and bordered by the fracturing black at the edges. He was inside a memory. A fragment of a memory, but here is where it had all begun. Here was the source.

The source of the hallucination.

A resilient thought, subversive even, that refused to disappear into the fracturing black. Refusing to die.

Refusing to be forgotten.

As he studied the memory's fragile permanence, the shadow of that feeling clouded his mind again. The same feeling that had possessed him inside the Machinist's infected mind. He wanted, no, needed—needed to see it. He needed to know it. He needed to understand it.

Sankofa!

And here. Now, in this off-space, he would.

*

Something moved.

Something at the chain-link fence. A figure. A human figure. The Auditor paced himself, each step taken with brittle caution.

Are you it?

He balled his fingers into a fist, more reflex than intention, as he moved closer.

Are you the source?

A man. There was a man, crouched in a foetal posture, facing the chain-link fence. Still. Motionless. The Auditor stood over him and logged what he saw.

A man. Breathing, faintly. Alive. Attempting contact.

He crouched over him, reached for his shoulder and slowly turned the man over. Then he sighed, unballing his fists.

Where a face should have been, there was nothing. A blank facelessness. Unrendered. The signs of a memory too damaged—corrupted—to decipher. A waste.

A dead end.

The Auditor stared down at the faceless thing, its chest rising and falling. Then he turned his sights around him. The fracturing black beyond the fence. The twisting debris of metal and rock above them. Back to the thing in front of him.

Is this it?

Is this the source?

His shoulders slumped as he reached for his spinal pod to tap himself out. Nothing more to see here.

Then the faceless man seized his wrist and groaned: “What about me?”

The Auditor’s eyes widened, in the grip of paralysing terror he had never known before. The thing’s hand closed around his wrist, vise-tight. Forcing him to witness what was coming.

Its face became a contorted mask of shifting configurations, features pushing up through the blankness, straining to be born. One by one, each feature surfaced. Each deforming the face before settling into the familiar. A brow. A nose. A mouth.

Then its eyes opened. Those eyes. Empty and dead. Only the fracturing black lived there, in those eyes.

“What about me?” it groaned, its fully formed face a grimace of despair.

“No,” the Auditor said through clamped lips. “It can’t be!”

Is this the source?

Despite the deadness in its eyes, it was unmistakable. The face staring up at him was his own.

*

Its grip slackened.

Its skin thickened and melted into something between liquid and tar. Inanimate, yet living. First, the hand gripping the Auditor's wrist dissolved. Then its whole body liquefied into a thick, dark mass. Viscous, yet warm. It climbed over his skin in fibrous tendrils of slick black, consuming him along his forearms and up his legs.

He twisted and struggled as he reached for his spinal pod to escape. The dark mass slithered up his other arm, caught his hand and hardened around his fingers, almost breaking them. His arm froze in mid-reach, mere inches away from the pod. He was trapped.

The dark mass tightened around his neck, constricting his throat. He fell on his back as the off-space around him began to turn.

The vortex slowed into an inward spiral, narrowing closer to the base. Closer to the eye. Closer to him. The cloud of debris, each fragment of metal and rock, retraced its path-lines in chaotic unison and reassembled at the edge of the clearing. Piece by piece. Fragment by fragment, until a wall of metal towered higher and higher and vanished into the fracturing black.

The dark mass found the corners of his clenched mouth, pried it open and poured down his throat, into his lungs. He felt it seep into his veins.

Then, a ball of fire erupted into existence. Radiant and misplaced in this place. The rolling flames folded in on themselves, running backwards, as if in retreat. Heat into cold. Light into dark.

The fire's roar receded into a splinter's whisper.

CLANK!

An invisible force hauled him toward the retreating flames, weightless. As the world spun wildly into a blur of light and shadow, he remembered something. Something on the edge. A thought, unformed. A feeling, unsettled. Something from before.

A memory.

The dark mass flooded his mind, filling every crevice, like water closing over him in a forbidden baptism.

The memory resurfaced through the dark mass in bits and pieces. Clay under fingernails. Canisters rattling in the hand. A word chasing him into the night. A word he wanted to forget.

Then, there. A shape in the flame.

It was her. The hallucination, standing in the fire.

Coward!

He always remembered her: in the fire.

- LEVEL 9 -

"Breathe!" the Steward said, the formality slipping from her voice.

She stood directly over him, her hands at her back, watching the seizure ripple through his body. His frame had buckled, shrivelling inwards toward his chest. Fingers splayed rigid, locked at impossible angles. Cords of muscle pulled taut along the length of his neck as veins bulged against the dark of his skin.

He was trying to scream, but nothing came.

The corner of her lips twitched upward as she watched him collapse, his tear-drenched face looking up at the ceiling. His eyes and mouth were stretched open. She could see the tongue rolling in the back of his throat, choking him. She stepped closer, lowered her body into a squat and placed her elbows on her knees. She leaned in until her face was directly above his.

"Breathe, Auditor!"

And he did.

The seizure drained from his body in waves as he slowly came back to himself. His fingers unlocked. The trembling subsided. His chest heaved with ragged breathing. Life returned to his body. But she did not watch or care for any of that. She knew what she wanted, what she had come for. She lingered above him, waiting to catch the moment in his eyes.

And then, *there!* There it was.

No longer hidden behind the armour of conditioning and compliance, but exposed. Bare and vulnerable. The confused, searching look of a man grasping for something he could not understand, but whose meaning he ached for. And the meaning was with her. The answer was with her.

That look was all she needed to see.

"There it is," she said. "That look. I always forget how much I need to see it."

"Who am I?" he said, each word punctuated by sharp heaves for air.

"Who are you," she said mildly. She extended her hand and wiped a tear trail from his temple. He did not flinch. "Who you were is far more interesting than who you are, Auditor." She rubbed the moisture between her fingertips, never taking her eyes off him.

"I don't understand," he rasped.

"Did you find her? The hallucination."

His face softened. A dazed look crept over him. "Yes. I ... did," he said, each word a painful admission.

She paused, stopped rubbing her fingertips.

"Did you remember her?"

The dazed look deepened, as he struggled to recollect. "I ... She ... I don't..."

"It will come back to you, Auditor," she said. "It always does."

Always.

The word came from her, yet felt like it came from him. Some hidden part of him he was only now remembering, surfacing out of the fracturing black. A memory within a memory, one that did not belong to him, and yet had always been there, always been his. Waiting for him to discover it. To own it. Like pieces coming together in some never-ending déjà vu.

The off-space.

The vortex.

The faceless man.

The fire.

The hallucination.

Her.

Always. Her.

"Always?" he said, forcing the feeling back down before it could anchor itself.

"Yes, Auditor," she said, through a broadening smile. Her eyes, unblinking. "Always."

"What does that—"

"This is not the first time we are having this conversation," she said. "In fact, this is the eighth time."

He shook his head.

"I don't under—"

"Eight times you have come in here. Eight times, you have entered the off-space and come back with that same look in your eyes." Her voice was rising with almost theatrical rapture. "Eight times! And no matter how many times we do this, you always come back. You always remember her!"

She paused. Her words rang off the walls, the room absorbing their force, but not their meaning.

Then, she blinked and continued. "You always remember me."

He caught his breath. For an instant, he saw someone he was not supposed to know staring back at him.

*

-LEYMAH -

There was a flash—a bright light—tearing me into a million pieces before everything went black. I thought I was dead.

I did not die.

I can't remember the order of things, but that does not matter. What matters is the world went quiet for what felt like endless stretches of time. I could not hear or see anything. Only feeling existed with me. Hands touching me. Pins and needles piercing my body, what was left of it. But, mostly, the feeling of pain. I remember losing all sense of myself. In such moments, there was no pain. Then I came to, and found the pain waiting for me.

I thought, this must be hell. This unending night.

Then somehow, I don't know why, in between the pain and the quiet, I remembered you. You, and how you ran away and left me there alone to face the bright lights. I saw you, running. I watched you, hoping you would come back, or at least, look back.

You did not. You, my Judas.

I found my hate, not for the Global Government or the men-in-suits, but for you. And it was a gift, my hatred for you. It saved me. It numbed the pain most days. But mostly, it was a comfort, a companion who never left me. The friend who stayed.

Then, one day, the pain stopped, and never returned. I didn't believe it at first. Some mind-trick, I thought. I waited, expecting the pain to come back. Then one day became days. Days became never. The pain never came back. It was gone.

My hate remained.

Then the voices came. They were just murmurs at first. I couldn't make out what they were saying. After time, the murmurs cleared. First into syllables, then words, until I could understand what they were saying. They were kind, those voices. Speaking to one another about me. I don't know if they knew I could hear them. There was more concern for me in those voices than anyone had shown me in a long time.

The voices spoke to me. *You are in a medical facility*, they said. My body was badly damaged, and they were rebuilding it, piece by piece. They didn't know how long it would take. I tried to speak, but my throat burned, raw, as though I had not used it in years. One of them touched me, leaned in close, and whispered, *We will take care of you*.

And I let them.

Then, the night came to an end. A light found me.

At first, all I saw were shifting blobs fusing into each other above me. Some leaning in, others drawing out, always blurred at the edges. Those must be the voices, I

thought. I felt their hands on me, and I felt safe, wishing I could see them. Slowly, the blobs sharpened. The blur thinned into defined outlines. The outlines into faces.

They stood around me. I was in a bed, surrounded by tubes feeding fluids into me and machines that flashed blinking lights. I did not know any of them, but I recognised the insignia on their white uniforms. Global Government.

My enemy! My captors!

I struggled to break free, but they had me restrained. I screamed through the raw burn in my throat. I didn't care. I hated them as I hated you. The pain returned, as I knew it would. I could feel the panic around my bed. They descended around me like a swarm of locusts, and then everything went black again.

Each day after that was the same. They came with kind words and kind hands, and I spat in their faces. I could see through it all. This was a mind game. It had to be. But why would they keep me alive? Why the effort? I turned it over again and again. The Global Government were no different than the men-in-suits. They only cared about their pockets. But why rebuild me, piece by piece? The men-in-suits would never do that. Why take care of me?

To break me, I convinced myself. That was it. They were keeping me alive to break me. They needed me whole, awake, aware, so I could feel the full weight of their torture. But why? Because I am a symbol. That was it. A symbol that one woman could stand up to the machines and claim our land, our birthright. They needed to break me as an example to the others. *Look at the one who failed*, they would say. *It will be you next*, they would warn. I would be broken in front of everyone.

I won't let them, I told myself. Not for my own sake, but for the Narrows.

Even for you.

Sankofa.

One night, while no one was around, I swallowed my tongue. I wanted to go out on my own terms. My last act of resistance! But the machines alerted them before I was gone. From then on, and for many more nights, I was never alone. There was always security close by.

Ahi! The message was clear; my body did not belong to me. I was not allowed to die.

I remember screaming at them, day after day. *You have stolen everything that was ours by right*, I said. *Our land! The riches beneath! My sovereignty! Leave me this one thing that is mine by right. My life! My death!*

Then someone behind the wall of people spoke. I could see him through the gap between the others, seated apart from the rest. He was watching me.

You will die, he said. *Just not today.*

He came every day, sat in the same seat, and watched. He did not wear the white uniform like the others. Superior, clearly. A somebody in the Global Government. Their men-in-suits. I would stare at him, partly to unsettle him. He always looked

back, often with a smile, like he knew some secret he could not wait to tell me. I would look away first. He never did. He always won.

One day, I spoke to him. *Why won't you let me die*, I asked him. He looked at me, that look still on his face.

I will tell you if you behave, he said. *I might even take you out of that bed and show you the sun outside. Would you like that?*

I did not answer, but I could tell he saw my response in my eyes.

They hadn't finished rebuilding me. I was just a bandaged torso with stumps for legs and only one arm. So he pushed me in a wheelchair up to the only window in the room. I saw the sun for the first time in months, years maybe. And then I saw the city, Arkopolis, rising from its foundations. I saw green patches I had never seen before in the cityscape. The sky was clearer, no smog. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

Where am I, I asked.

Don't you recognise the Old City, he said. *We demolished most of it and started rebuilding. Magnificent, isn't it?*

I think I scoffed a little.

So is this how you break me, I said. *By showing me that I failed to stop you from stealing our land?*

I don't want to break you, he said. There was no threat in his voice.

You think I can't see it, I said, being so sure of myself. *You want to break me, and I won't let you.*

You were broken when we found you, he said. *Your people saw to that.*

Liar! You think you can turn me against my people!

I don't have to. Your people turned on you!

Ahi! Awam! Lies! All lies!

You don't have to believe me. Believe your eyes.

He pulled up the old recordings, and showed me the world I had slept through.

I watched the e-billboard crackle into static and reconfigure into my own face. My recording, the one from the Harvester played across the screen in the square in the Narrows. My face. My voice.

...I did this for you ... remember this.

Then I waited. I waited for the fire to rise in the people, the same fire that burned in me. The fire did come: but it came against me.

The people marched in the lanes and the square carrying placards they had written with their own hands.

SHE CHOSE THE BIRD! WE CHOOSE BREAD!

NO MORE BLACKOUTS. NO MORE MARTYRS.

SOVEREIGNTY DOESN'T FEED US!

THE LIGHTS STAYED ON WITHOUT HER!

I watched as my people burnt effigies of me in the street and banned the Sankofa bird as a “seditious symbol”. My leaders, the men-in-suits, branded me and those that still followed me “enemies of progress”. They called me dangerous, a disease that had to be purged from the Narrows.

My death was supposed to wake them, but instead, they all chose to stay asleep. One by one, they turned on me, and then moved on. They forgot about me. They abandoned me when I needed them.

Just like you did.

I could not watch any more recordings, but I did not know where else to look. The rising city outside was like a taunting finger. And him. I did not want to look at him. I did not want him to see what he had done to me.

I am sorry about what happened to you, he said. He did not gloat. That was the worst of it.

Awam! Stop it! Don't pretend to care about me, I replied. *You are my enemy!*

Yes, but I don't see you as mine, he said. He came down to my level, eye to eye. Equals. *You and I are believers.*

I scoffed at the thought.

I'll tell you what I believe, he said. I could see the sun in his eyes. *I believe those people, your people, did not deserve your death. It was a waste.*

He paused. I could see he wanted me to sit with that.

I too have something I would die for. Something bigger than your sovereignty. He nodded toward the window, toward the city. *That. Out there. Do you remember what was here before the greening? Concrete madness. Parched land. Poisoned water. The sky thick with smog. All because of the world's hunger for fossil fuels. A hunger that was burning us alive. Wars and rumours of wars. Countries destabilising countries in the name of liberation when they came only for the oil.*

There was something in his voice. I could not name it at the time.

I fought that hunger my whole life, he said. *Protests. Petitions. Sabotage. None of it worked. Every year, I kept losing. The earth paid for my failure. Then we found Orunite. The god mineral. We could undo a century of damage in less than a generation.*

But now I know what it was I saw in him. A fire. The same fire that had burned in me.

I had a choice, he said. *Your sovereignty or the survival of the planet.* His voice dipped. I remember that. *I chose the planet. It was an impossible choice. I wish I hadn't had to make that choice, but I did. And I would do it again, even if it cost me my life.*

That does not excuse stealing our land, I said.

We stole nothing, he said, the way a parent corrects a child. A father his daughter. *We did not have to. Your leaders, your men-in-suits, mismanaged everything they touched. They stole from you long before we came. And when your people were given the*

choice, they chose stewardship. We did not come by conquest. We came by consent. Your own consent.

He paused, considering his words. He gestured at the window again.

In time, all of that, the whole coastline, will become part of Arkopolis. And we will not fire a single bullet to make it happen. It will happen because your people mismanaged themselves into their own recolonisation. You were given everything. Land. Water. Forests. The richest soil on the planet. Look what you did with it.

He waited for an answer that never came.

I know. You think I am evil, he said. That would make it so much easier for you to hate me. To call me your enemy. A villain. But what your people failed to do with nature's gifts—that was evil. Expecting me to stand by and watch the world burn in the name of your sovereignty, your rights. That was evil.

He placed his hand on my stump and gave it a gentle squeeze.

I am not your villain. I am not your enemy. You and I have the same enemy.

My people? Is that it? You want me to hate my people?

No. Our enemy is not flesh and blood. It's never been. It isn't the fossil fuel nations, nor your men-in-suits. Our enemy is far more elusive. It's an idea. An old philosophy that teaches men to see only what they can take for themselves from nature. A philosophy that does not care what becomes of the people, so long as it is fed.

He let go of my stump, but I still felt the print of his palm. He got up and looked down at me.

It's that old philosophy that has driven men to poison the waters, scorch the sky, and kill one another. It was in those men, your leaders, who sold your continent out from under you.

He paused.

It was in your people too, when they squandered what nature had given them. Forgive me; I know that's hard for you to hear, but poverty does not confer innocence. That is the truth. Believer to believer.

I don't know where my words came from.

What do you want from me? I said.

I believe in you, in your fire. I just think it would be better spent fighting for the other side. My side. Our side, if you want.

He pushed my wheelchair away from the window and took me back to the machines and tubes.

When we are done with you, when you are ready, then you can decide what to die for.

His words stayed with me, haunted me in my dreams. I stayed in that bed as they rebuilt my body. Legs. Feet. Arm. Some stages took longer than others, but they never stopped working on me. He always came and sat in his chair, watching me. We still played the staring game. He let me win sometimes. He would take me to

the window on occasion, often because I asked. We often sat in silence and watched the city rise further into the sky and beyond the horizon.

Beautiful, he would say. I never answered him; I didn't need to.

When I had my legs back, I walked with him outside in the sun and the green. I had never breathed air so fresh, so clean. I had never seen the sky that blue before. I couldn't stay in the sun for long; my face was still bandaged. The last part of me they would work on, they said. He told me about his work, about how the planet was healing. I mostly listened. He would often ask me if I had made my choice to join his cause. I don't remember what I said to him, but each time, he would give me this stare. Something between disappointment and understanding.

Take your time, he said. And I did; and somewhere along the way, I lost my taste for death, and I hated myself for it.

I watched the world change from my bed, just as he predicted. Protest spread across coastal nations. The Orunite Spring, they called it. People demanded that control be handed over to the Global Government. One placard I saw said it all: **THEY MANAGE WHAT WE WASTED!**

One by one, countries gave up their territory. Some by consent. Others only after rioting in the streets. But he was right. The Global Government didn't fire one bullet. And I watched, and understood his truth.

Something in me broke.

I cried so hard in bed that day, the synthetic grafting on my neck tore open. I cried like I had lost something. Something that was mine, that I could never get back.

He came quickly once he heard. He leaned over and asked me what was wrong. *You broke me*, I kept saying over and over. *You broke me*.

I don't know when his hand found my shoulder. *I did not break you*, he said. *They did. You are just finding that out. I'm trying to build you back*.

I stopped crying, and I did not hate myself for it.

Later, when they had finished with the rest of my body, it was time for my face. *Would you like to make changes?* they asked. I answered quickly, as if the words were waiting on the tip of my tongue. *Yes, a new one*, I said. *Any preference?* I looked at my bandaged face in the mirror, trying to remember her. Me. *Anything other than what was there before*, I said. I did not want to see her again. That woman from the Narrows.

I never did.

After they had finished, the security detail never came back. There was nothing left in me to guard.

After that, he brought me along into rooms I was never meant to enter. Tables where no one from the Narrows had ever sat.

A re-education, he called it. *Until you find your place in our cause.* I sat, quiet, on the outer rim of those tables, and listened to people with power decide the fate of the world. A game whose rules they set and whose outcome they already knew. But mostly, I searched. I searched for my place, my seat, my voice at those tables.

Me, a rebel in search of a place in another cause. A soapbox without a voice.

Then it began. First along the Harvester coastline: a severed cable, a cooling main cracked open until the refining core turned to slag. Then within Arkopolis itself, a photon lattice shattered into dead glass, a fire set in the hanging gardens of flame lilies. Ribbons of smoke curled higher and higher into the blue sky like in the time before. The way they had done in the Narrows. A violent black against a clean blue.

A desperate past clinging to an indifferent future.

I recognised the pattern: sabotage. Intentional, yet familiar. An insurgency, the men at the tables called it. A nameless rebellion with no face and no demands. That unsettled them most—who was doing this and what did they want? Arkopolis had opened its borders to the labour it needed—hands pulled in from the ruined communities along the coast, from failed states, and fallen nations whose names had lost their lustre. Every hand that raised the city could just as easily tear it down, piece by piece, and there was no telling one from the other.

Until we caught one of them.

It was at the rail line this time, the spur meant to join the eastern towers. The insurgent had cut the maglev spine and brought a whole span down. The third that season. Hundreds dead. The world would wait weeks for its Orunite. The men at the table knew what to do with hungry bellies and outstretched palms. Not this. This was different. We gave them bread and work, one said. Why do they still burn it? They kept asking, turning it over again and again, as if the next turn would reveal the answer. It never did. It never would. This was something they could never know, a game whose rules they could not understand.

But I knew. I understood.

For the first time, from the outer rim of the table, I spoke. “I want to see the insurgent.”

He was at the crash site, which had been cordoned off. Authorised personnel only. The insurgent was young—too young. Wrists bound to his ankles. Bleeding at the mouth, surrounded by security personnel who had clearly had their way with him. Something around his throat caught my eye. A scrap of old cloth. Red cloth. Then I knew. Somehow, I knew. It’s funny. I hadn’t thought of you in years. And yet, as I looked at that boy, his head hanging, I thought it was you. I wanted it to be you.

Looking back now, I was not yet ready to understand why I felt that way.

The insurgent saw my Global Government uniform and began to shout. Not pleas for his life, but words of defiance. Familiar words. My words. The ones I had

left in the fire a lifetime before. Remember this. Remember me. He threw them at me like stones, not knowing whose hands had cut them first.

"Leave me with him," I asked the security personnel. They obeyed, shuffling a cautious distance away.

He was still screaming. I let him.

...that is how it always begins...

Then I said them back to him, low but clear. Every single word.

...they will say we needed them...

My lips remembered the shape of the words. His shouting died in his throat.

...they will say we were children...

I sat down across from him. Close. Too close. He was silent.

"I know why you do it," I said. "The sabotage. The shouting. You want to be seen. You don't want to be forgotten. You want to matter."

He gazed at me, his eyes burning crimson.

"Here is the truth I wish someone had told me," I said. "You don't matter. The future is coming whether you destroy every rail line or burn every hanging garden. The future does not need your permission. This war, these fires, that little bird, none of it will stop what is coming. You don't matter. You don't even matter enough to hate."

He shook his head, over and over. I held his wet gaze.

"You think you are a victim. You are. But not of these people. Not of me. You are the victim of an idea. It told you that because you were born, you are owed. That because you exist, you matter, and because you matter, a place should be kept for you in the future to come. It is a beautiful lie. No one is owed a place. You earn it."

Then something I had never let myself feel before came over me. I looked at him. Truly looked, and I saw it. A shiftlessness lingering behind the eyes. I couldn't believe I never noticed it before. I couldn't un-see it.

I pitied him. I pitied you.

"Those words you were shouting," I said, "they were never yours. I knew the woman who first spoke them. She believed them, wrongly, but with her whole life. She is dead now, and yet you still carry them. They must be so heavy—words that were never yours. Aren't they?"

He started swinging his head back and forth, hiding his face from me.

"Aren't you tired?" I said, gently. "Aren't you tired of carrying a belief that was never yours to carry? There is no shame in letting go. Not everyone is built to believe. Some are built to follow. To serve. You were handed a weight you were never made to lift, and yet you were told it was yours."

I leaned closer and found my voice, my place.

"Let me lift it. Let me carry the belief, for both of us. I am built for it. Let me unburden you. Let me be the one who believes, and you the one who follows. Follow me. Let me make you matter. Let me."

His whimper was a whisper. He leaned toward me, his bound hands trembling. "Tell me what to believe," he said.

I brought my mouth close to his ear. This was between us. "I'll show you." And he let me.

The insurgent was taken away, and I returned to the table, where a seat awaited me. No longer on the outer rim, looking in. I knew my place. I knew what I had to do. I had to protect Arkopolis from the sickness, dangerous ideas inherited from the time before. The old philosophies that had burned the sky, poisoned the earth, and corrupted the soul.

We needed new ideas, new philosophies. *We need right-think*, I said. A common mind shaped around a new philosophy, leaving no room for the old ones to take root again. *This could not be left to chance or choice*, I said. We needed a way to monitor the mind. To reach inside and clear the subversive thought before it spread, before it dragged us back to the philosophy that had almost destroyed the world.

I was there when we built the technology. Conditioning, we called it. *It should be a requirement for citizenship*, I said.

They—the men at the table—agreed.

I helped them build it. I helped them test it. And then we brought it to the masses. At first—I don't know why—I thought people would push back. I expected them to resist or at least say we had gone too far.

Nothing. They did nothing. I was there when the queues first came to the Old City and then the Narrows. People waiting outside the Stewardship kiosks so they could feed their children. And I was there, years later, when the lines started forming again outside Arkopolis. Lines that stretched for miles. Some came in search of work. Hungry. Desperate. Some came from failed neighbouring states. Many came from the old powers—the drowned coasts of Old Europe, the scorched heartlands of America. The Mediterranean took its share of lives, as it always had. Only now the bodies it gave back to the shore were no longer black or brown.

They lined up for days, hundreds, then thousands of them. Maybe millions in the end. Men and women, lining up to sign away their minds, the last sovereignty that was truly theirs by right—given up for full stomachs.

And then I saw you. You were there, in the line. Among them.

Waiting your turn.

*

The platform with the spinal display turned and descended back into the floor.

He had rolled over on his front and started crawling to the wall, dragging his body away from her. She followed him, her hands tucked under her tunic.

"I wronged you," she said, her voice neutral. "I gave you an impossible choice."

"I don't understand," he said, still straining his body towards the wall. "This is not happening!"

"This has happened before, Auditor," she said. "The hallucination is part of the system I built. Another form of control, designed to root out suggestible minds. Gullible minds, like yours. Yet, no matter how many times I erase your memory, you keep coming back here to this room. To her—my hallucination—like a dog looking for a master who died long ago."

He dragged himself across the floor until his hand slapped the wall. He was spent, drained. His body had not yet recovered from the off-space. He pivoted until his back was pressed against the wall, facing her. She stood only a few steps away.

"Freedom is a burden for you, isn't it?" she started, like a mother to a son. "The freedom to decide what you believe? I spent years being angry at you. I should have pitied you instead."

She paused and looked at him. His face was a trail of tears and sweat.

"I have told you this before. Eight times. In this room. And each time is the same." Her voice fell. "You were never built to carry such a burden. I can carry it for you because I can make the impossible choices you never could. As I always have."

"But I wronged her—I abandoned her!"

The spinal pod righted itself, slow and cold, settling back into position. Her eyes glazed over into that familiar film of milky grey. But her face did not harden the way it had before. She slipped deep inside his mind again, deeper than the dark mass had reached, and this time her presence was soft. Gentle. Almost tender.

"Why do you hold on to that?" she said, glazed eyes trained on him. "Each time we have this conversation, that guilt never leaves you. That guilt from the day you left her. Let it go. Let her go." The room narrowed around her words. "She—I—forced you to die for a past that wasn't worth saving. Let me show you a future you can live for. Help me build it."

"I won't betray her again," he groaned, his jawline tightening. "I won't."

"She is dead. I am here. She never deserved your service. Follow me. Serve me!"

She waited. His whimpers carried across the room.

"Or," she started. "I could erase your memory again. A ninth time, and we play this game again, and again."

"What are you getting out of this?" he blurted out.

Her eyes cleared.

"In all the loops before, you've never asked me that," she said, genuine curiosity thawing her voice.

"Honestly?" She squatted in front of him, reached out, and laid her palm against his cheek. He flinched slightly, then stilled and leaned into it, both his hands rising to close over hers and hold it to his face, the way a man cradles a warmth he knows will not stay.

"I see her sometimes—Leymah—when I look in the mirror. My face has changed, but I see her behind my eyes, like an infection. I can feel her judgement, a stain that I can't rub off."

He said nothing as her finger traced a slow line through the wet on his cheek.

"She is my stain to carry. Not yours. She is the sickness I gave you. Her words. Her violence. That is my guilt. I won't stop, no matter how many times you come up that lift, until you let her go. Until you forget her."

Silence and memory hung in the space between them, only for a moment.

"Please," she said. "Let her go."

His hands dropped to the floor with a dull thud. He leant in close to her ear and whispered—too low for the room to carry, too low for anyone—but her.

*

He stepped into the lift and selected his floor on the display panel. The Steward stood a few steps away from the lift, waiting to see him off. He turned around and faced her, hands clasped behind his back.

"Steward."

"Auditor."

The doors slid shut between them, and the lift descended from Level 9.

2104

- THE NARROWS -

Bruised. Aching everywhere. Alive.

I found her recording orb in the underbrush. Badly burnt, still working. I sat in the corner of my room, the streetlight outside through the window my only light. I was not good with my hands, but after a few clicks and beeps, I got it working.

The orb rose in the air and threw a light on my wall. There she was. In mid-sentence, on my wall.

...I did this for you...

A projection. Her last recording. I grabbed the orb and figured out how to rewind. Her face danced on my wall. Her eyes, wide. The bird, flying.

Her words. Her light.

...they will say I was mad...

Her image was sharp. Like she was there, in the room with me. I wanted to reach out and touch her shoulder, the way she did to me. I still felt the press of her hand on my shoulder.

...that is how it always begins...

Noise. Outside. Murmurs. The explosion had shaken the Narrows awake. People in the streets. Tongues already wagging. Gossip knows no sleep. No one knew what started the fire, but I did. She did.

...remember this...

I left her there! Alone. In the fire. I could have saved her. Like before. I should have saved her. I should have tried. The way she looked at me. Why didn't she understand I was trying to save her?

...remember me...

The recording ended, my room cut to black. I started it again. And again. And again. I lost count how many times I watched her on my wall that night. Even when morning came, I kept watching her. Listening to her.

She deserved that from me.

...remember this...

More. I needed to do more. More than just watch her on my wall. People needed to know who started the fire. People needed to know what she gave up for them, what she lost for them.

For me.

I needed to keep her fire alive. She shouldn't be a forgettable. Not her!

I watched her one more time.

...remember me...

I stepped out into the afternoon light, my red bandana over my mouth, walked into the square and climbed on top of an old water container.

THE END

BLACK YAM



CHINELO ONWUALU

Black Yam

BY CHINELO ONWUALU

*Why did we do it?
You ask.
You have chosen to blame us for the Collapse—
For the chaos, the disease, and the famine that came after.
Those of you who stole from the world still rage—
At the loss of what you hoped to hoard.
Those who had too little despaired—
Believing you had lost even that.
But we did not create that precarious world
Its cruel systems so fragile one only had to brush against them
With the barest hint of compassion
To destroy them.
And so,
We did.
We do not need you to understand why.
Your children's children
—Unto the seventh generation—
They will understand.
They will thank us.
Your approval was never required.*

Lena felt the corners of her mouth tugging upwards and fought to school her face into neutrality. This was the keynote address at the Annual Conference of African Phytopathologists. They'd been flown out from her head office in Gaborone to Addis Ababa to attend, for Goddess' sake! This was serious business! But something about the way Dr Abel Kambarage said the word "fermentation", with an unusual singsong pitch and an unnecessary emphasis on the "men," made her want to screech with laughter.

Don't laugh, she desperately chided herself.

It wasn't just her. The rest of her team seated along her row were also fighting back their amusement. Next to her, Julius was pinching the bridge of his nose, his bald head sheened with sweat and his burly shoulders shaking. Beside him, young Abena was doubled over in her seat, one hand clapped over her mouth and the other gripping Julius's sleeve. Ma Yasina was biting her lips, but the older woman's petite frame was quivering with the effort to hold herself together. Only Samsudeen, seated at the other end of the row with his long legs tucked nearly to his chest, seemed unaffected. His face behind his thick-rimmed spectacles was impassive, but Lena caught his wince every time the professor said the word. Lena put a fist to her mouth and tried to take a series of shaky breaths.

On stage, Dr Kambarage mercifully wound down his speech on mycotoxin contamination in indigenous food fermentations. But it hardly mattered. By the time the polite applause began, Lena, officially known as Magdalena Mbgewike, a lead investigator at the African Union's Ministry of Agriculture, was crying with laughter.

Afterwards, in a corner of the conference hall, she tried to scold her team.

"Guys, come on now, that was inappropriate—" she began, but then she met Abena's eye. The young Ghanaian woman began to giggle. Then Ma Yasina whispered the word "fermentation" in her thick Ugandan accent, mimicking Dr Kambarage's delivery, and that was the end of it. She, Julius, Abena and Ma Yasina doubled over laughing.

"You people are not serious," Samsudeen muttered ruefully as he worked to suppress a smile.

"What is so funny?" A sharp voice cut in and their laughter dried up instantly. Everyone straightened as Madam Ba, the head of their department, strode over. The woman was a "personal hire" who had gotten her job when her husband had been appointed acting head of the Ministry last year. Perhaps that was why she always radiated the aggrieved indignation of someone who was sure they were the butt of some unknown joke.

Madam Ba stopped in front of Lena and eyed her suspiciously. "Always laughing, you this woman. What is the joke, eh?"

“Good afternoon, Ma,” Lena said instead, careful to keep her previous amusement out of her voice.

Madam Ba gave her a sceptical once over, then gestured towards Dr Kambarage, who was now following her, a datapad clutched to his chest.

“The good doctor has a case for you and your team,” she announced. “I will allow him explain it to you as I am sure the science is above my head.”

Lena fought the urge to roll her eyes. Like her, Madam Ba had PhDs in mycotoxicology and botany, yet she often acted as if she’d never had access to formal education. Lena knew that playing up her identity as an “authentic” indigenous farmer helped her boss deflect charges of nepotism. It also made it easier to dismiss Lena and her team as out-of-touch academics, even though she herself had never done any fieldwork, and they had two decades of combined on-ground experience among them.

Lena also found this false dichotomy deeply patronising. Being educated entirely online did not make the average African farmer somehow less intelligent than those trained in person. In fact, after thousands of conversations with them, Lena knew that the men and women who had worked their lands for generations were just as knowledgeable about genetics, microbiology, and biotechnology as any university researcher.

Dr Kambarage began talking almost as soon as Madam Ba left. “As you know, I have been researching the unique fermentation techniques of the peoples of the Plateau Highlands of Nigeria,” he began.

“Of course,” Lena said. She shot Julius a look, and he gave her a small shrug in return. If this had been the subject of the professor’s talk, neither of them had been paying attention.

The professor walked over to the nearest table and put the datapad down. He began projecting images, graphs, and charts into the air in front of him, as if at an impromptu lecture. Lena suspected that most of the professor’s interactions with other people felt like lectures to them.

“In March, I received reports of residents falling sick after consuming contaminated kunu. The illness was short-lived: a fever that lasted one or two days, affecting only children, who upon recovery began acting strangely.”

“Strangely how?” Julius asked.

“Reports vary. Some children claimed to have visions in which they saw the past or the future, others said they could read people’s minds. One child claimed she could ‘step outside her body and fly’.”

“Are you sure it was the contaminant that caused these delusions?” Samsudeen asked. “There might have been other vectors in the environment.”

“Do not be so certain that they are delusions,” said Ma Yasina. “Children tell the truth as they see it.”

“We are sure it was the contaminant,” said Dr Kamabarage, speaking to Samsudeen and ignoring Ma Yasina, as male professors often did. At barely five feet, with deep brown skin that was smooth and unwrinkled, most people assumed she was much younger than her fifty-plus years. Lena saw the older woman’s lips tighten, and decided that she too was unimpressed by this man.

“The progression of the illness is too consistent,” Dr Kamabarage continued. “Children who drank the kunu would fall sick, then recover, then start making unusual claims. We have seized the contaminated supplies and located the source; it was one community in the region. But we have not been able to determine the actual contaminant, nor have we been able to replicate the conditions that may have led to the outbreak.”

“So you want us to go there and investigate?” Julius said. It was more a statement than a question.

“Given its propensity to affect the young, we need to know what happened and keep it from happening again,” Dr Kamabarage said.

Lena nodded decisively. “Then we will be ready to travel by tomorrow morning. Please forward me all your case notes and any relevant research.”

The professor blinked at her, appearing confused by her request. When Julius reached for the datapad, he looked relieved and handed it to him. But his face fell when Julius passed the datapad to Lena. He managed to rally himself, however, and promised to have a vehicle ready for them at the Jos City Airport when they arrived. Then he loped off into the scrum of the main conference hall.

They all took a moment to watch him go. Then Abena nudged Lena.

“What is kunu?” she whispered.

“A delicious drink made from the *fer-mehn*-tation of millet, sorghum, or maize,” said Ma Yasina.

And with that, they were all laughing again. This time, even Samsudeen couldn’t help but join in.

*

The next morning, Lena and her team headed to Bole International Airport. As the ministry’s sleek, driverless e-car sped through the quiet pre-dawn streets of Addis Ababa, Lena stared thoughtfully out the window.

They were headed to a small village named Sabon Miri in Plateau State, Nigeria. Though she’d grown up in Jos, the region’s largest city, she hadn’t been back in over a decade, not since her last visit to pack up the family home after her mother died. For most of her life, it had just been the two of them. When Lena was five years old, her mother had left a bad marriage in their hometown of Aba and moved to Jos to become a Traditional Knowledge Studies teacher at an upscale private school.

It wasn't a bad childhood. Despite the geopolitical chaos of the 2020s and 30s, her mother had managed to create a comfortable life for them. There had always been food in the fridge and money for necessities. There had been day trips to Gurara Falls and Yankari National Park, and whenever her mother attended the annual conference of Indigenous Knowledge Keepers in Cotonou, Lena got to go too. As the child of a teacher, Lena had been able to attend the school for free. She'd received a first-class education, and her friends came from some of the wealthiest families in the country. She'd tagged along on family trips to the crumbling cities of Eurasia and school trips to Obudu Ranch and the Lekki Wildlife Sanctuary. Because she was clever, athletic, and easygoing, Lena was popular among her peers—even though her wardrobe consisted of solid local brands, not the latest Chinese and Korean fashions.

The differences hadn't shown up until after graduation, when her classmates had headed off to Beijing, and Singapore, and Seoul—tuitions fully paid for and jobs in family businesses waiting for them afterwards. Meanwhile she had gone to UniLag on a scholarship to study biotechnology. She'd managed to claw her way through the halls of higher education, working any odd job she could get and selling homemade soaps, body butters, and body oil blends. But it had meant she'd never had much time or money to visit home—even during the holidays. By the time she'd secured a half-decent job at the Ministry, it was too late. Her mother hadn't even told her about the cancer until it was terminal. Her reason: "You seemed so busy, I didn't want to worry you." Within months, she was gone.

"Boss, we're here," Julius' voice cut into Lena's thoughts. She hadn't even noticed the car stopping at the airport's temporary drop-off zone. Or that everyone had disembarked except her. Lena pushed down the lump that had formed unexpectedly in her throat and forced a cheery smile.

"Alright gang," she chirped, stepping out of the vehicle. "Let's do this."

With that, they gathered their equipment and headed to the visa-free boarding gates reserved for citizens from African Union countries.

*

Several hours later, the five of them were sequestered in an old hybrid electric-diesel engine bus and labouring up into the Plateau Highlands in North-Central Nigeria. Passing through Jos City itself hadn't been so bad. The metropolis had become nearly unrecognisable in the decade since she'd been away, and childhood landmarks had been absorbed into new builds. The countryside was a different matter.

It was greener than she remembered. The warming climate had shifted the semi-arid landscape of her youth into something more tropical. The dusty plains and cactus fences had largely transformed into lush fields and stands of yellowwood, bush plum, and black rosewood. But as they sped past strange rock formations that looked like a god had carelessly strewn boulders from its pockets, Lena was filled

with a sudden heartsickness. If she closed her eyes, she could easily be fooled into thinking she was on one of the many road trips she and her mother used to take. She shook her head to clear the feeling.

"It looks like they found high levels of ergot alkaloids in the collected samples, but they're not exactly sure what kind," said Abena from the front seat. She was reading aloud from her massive laptop. At only twenty-three, the young woman was the best systems engineer Lena had ever worked with. She was also the only one who still operated one of those old-fashioned monstrosities; she claimed it was easier to code on.

During the flight, the team had taken time to review the case files that Dr Kambarage had sent. While poring over the initial tests that had detected the presence of mycotoxins, Lena was pleased to note that the results had been attained using portable colloidal gold test strips. Developed in India and China in the late 2010s, the strips provided some of the most accurate testing strategies in the field, and hardly ever produced false positives or negatives. Whatever else she could say about the man, Dr Kambarage did not skimp on his equipment.

"Ergot makes sense," said Samsudeen from the back row, which he'd occupied to allow his long legs a chance to stretch. "The children's symptoms did include hallucinations ... so the fungal agent is most likely *Claviceps purpurea*. After all, their ergots were used to make the first kinds of LSD."

"Yes, but *C. purpurea* is a temperate fungus. I'm not sure if you have been paying attention, but the climate has been warming up, not cooling down," said Ma Yasina drily. Before switching to mycology, the older woman had been one of the top climate scientists with the United Nations' World Food Program.

"And ergot poisoning in humans is characterised by gangrene and convulsions, not just feverish hallucinations," said Julius from the driver's seat. He drove, squinting at the screen of the GPS navigation system. Wi-fi reception was spotty this far from the city. "I saw a whole village come down with it during the war—it wasn't pleasant. There's no report of any such symptoms in this case."

Julius had been a medic with the African Union's forces during the Corporate Wars of the 2040s. Though he and Lena were age mates, he'd spent his twenties patching up drone-fire victims in Mali, Chad, and Djibouti, and digging through the rubble of destroyed cities across Iran, Lebanon, and Palestine. He was now the best general practice doctor she knew.

"That's true," Samsudeen nodded, conceding the point. Though a thorough academic researcher, he'd only been working in the field for a few years.

"I think it's something entirely new," said Lena, pulling up the notes she'd made earlier. The team fell silent and waited to hear more. Lena had a reputation for unconventional analysis—conclusions she'd pull from a variety of data points that others wouldn't think to examine.

"So I was looking at the weather conditions ... It appears that this last rainy season was quite heavy and the area experienced extensive flooding throughout. Perfect growth conditions for a fungal infestation, don't you think? And the millet would be the ideal candidate for it... But did you notice the yams?"

She called up the picture that had caught her attention—a snapshot of the storage shed where the suspected infected millet had been stored—and projected it into the air just above them. Then she zoomed in on a section in the background: A pyramid of seed yam tubers piled on a wooden platform.

"They are growing yam? In the Jos Plateau?" said Abena. "I thought the climate there was too cold for that."

"Not necessarily," sighed Ma Yesina. "We are nearly a full degree warmer than twenty years ago. You would still need a greenhouse to protect against night-time temperature drops, but it is not impossible. Also, I have heard that new strains have been developed to help it grow in more places across the country."

"But that yam is black," said Samsudeen in a whisper.

"Yep," said Lena. "Ever seen anything like it?"

Samsudeen shook his head. "If the yam is the fungal carrier, then we would be looking at fumonisin or zearalenone mycotoxins, which are produced by any number of *Fusarium* fungi, not ergot alkaloids. Did they test it?"

"They did," said Abena, pulling up the records on her machine. "The results were inconclusive."

"*Fusariums* can cause diarrhoea and stunt children's growth. They can even lead to esophageal cancers," said Julius. "But they are not associated with any neurogenerative symptoms, as far as I know."

"It's a mystery," said Lena, unable to keep the excitement out of her voice. She needed something to focus on to fill the yawning emptiness inside her. "Good thing we're on our way there. We'll see for ourselves."

*

The sun was starting to set when they finally arrived in the town. Sabon Miri was a small enclave in the northern part of the state founded by a group of ethnic Igbos who had moved out of the Jos metropolis during the violent crises that had wracked the state from the 2010s onwards. According to the 2064 census, it consisted of about 160 people belonging to twenty families, mostly Christian—Roman Catholic, specifically.

The town was nestled in a low valley between two granite hills. From the top of the road, Lena had a chance to glimpse it laid out like a tapestry of reflective black solar tiles, green fields, and red-brown earth paths, before they descended into it. The warm temperatures of the day had dipped and by the time they pulled up to the

house of the village head, Lena had swaddled herself in the wool Basotho blanket that she took everywhere with her.

The house was a low bungalow with a wide columned veranda painted blue. A small group of people had gathered in front of it and were waiting for them. Lena recognised the village head, a tall regal-looking woman in her seventies, from the brief video call they'd had when the team had landed in Jos. Beside her was a younger woman in her thirties, who carried the same bearing. Lena blinked in surprise at the rest of the party. Instead of the usual assortment of middle-aged men who tended to dominate local politics in rural Nigeria, this delegation consisted of women of all ages—with the exception of one man and a little boy.

"Welcome!" the village head called out, the stern lines of her face breaking into a soft smile. She strode forward with the vigour of someone decades younger and wrapped Lena in a warm embrace. "I am Ezinne Agbor—we spoke before by phone. This is my daughter, Ama."

Ezinne made a flurry of introductions to the other people with her—Lena promptly lost track of all their names—then led the team into her house. The interior was spare but clean, a few family photos on the wall, a crucifix over the doorway, and brown ceramic tiles across the floor. One side of the spacious central room had been designated as the sitting room. In it, two old leather couches, their seats cracked and worn thin from long years of use, sat on a thick wool carpet which also showed signs of wear around the edges. They were flanked by two matching side tables, each topped with a vase of false flowers. A battered centre table with yet another vase of false flowers sat in the middle of the carpet. On the other side of the room, a long wooden table whose chairs had been moved to the living room to provide more seating, marked the dining area.

Lena's team was granted pride of place on the two couches, but while she expected that the village head would take one of the nearby dining chairs, the spot went to the oldest member of the party instead—a gnarled old woman with a bronze-tipped cane. The other chairs were taken by a teenage girl whose congenitally twisted leg required her to use crutches, a young woman nursing a baby, and the boy who looked to be about ten. The rest of the delegation, including the village head, sat on sturdy white plastic chairs that had clearly been brought in for the occasion.

"I hope your journey was smooth?" asked a middle-aged man as he set down a tray laden with soft drinks and plates of food on the centre table.

"Yes, it was, thank you," Lena answered, absently. The savoury smell of pounded yam and ora soup greeted Lena's nose, but she took a moment to examine the man who served them. He was in his sixties, neatly dressed in a faded t-shirt and trousers, the standard uniform of Indigenous farmers across the continent. This was the type of man she'd normally find at the head of the community's representatives; instead, he hadn't been among the welcome party at all. He was here placing large bowls of

clean water for washing their hands on the floor by their feet. His movements were sure and practiced, as if he did this all the time. There was no trace of the diffidence of a hired help, nor did he seem embarrassed, as if doing a chore beneath him.

Catching Lena's gaze, he smiled warmly. "I am Ikenna," he said. "Me and Ezinne are married."

Across from her, the young woman finished nursing the baby, and a young man, the delegation's only adult male member, gently scooped up the infant. He laid the baby against his shoulder and began to burp it, patting its back and rocking from side to side. In all her years visiting rural communities, Lena had never seen men so ... a discreet nudge from Julius, who sat beside her, brought Lena back to the conversation at hand.

"We are so happy that you are here," the old woman was saying. "Dr Abel told us you were coming. What can we do to help you? Anything you want, we can do."

Lena wasn't sure how to respond. The residents of Sabon Miri were specialty farmers who were known for their high-quality foodstuff. For small producers like them, even a single allegation of food poisoning could be disastrous. A widespread outbreak, like the one that had followed their contaminated kunu, could destroy the reputation they had spent decades building and unravel their business. They had been required to suspend their business operations during Dr Kambarage's inquiry, and now they had a full team of food safety investigators from the Ministry of Agriculture at their door. They couldn't be happy about it, yet she saw no signs of anger or disaffection from any of the delegates.

Lena decided to get down to business. She began by summarising what had brought them to the community.

"We need to identify what was in the kunu that made the children sick so that we can make sure it doesn't happen again," she concluded. "Mr Ali" —she gestured towards Samsudeen—"will need to examine your tools and harvesting equipment, as well as anywhere you store food, so that he can take samples."

"I can take you tomorrow," said the man with the baby. The infant was now dozing peacefully against his shoulder.

"All the children who fell sick, are they still around?" asked Julius. "I would like to examine them."

The little boy on one of the dining chairs raised his hand, as if at school. "Me, sir. I was sick."

Julius gave the boy a gentle smile. "How are you feeling now?"

"I am fine, sir. But you, why are you so sad?"

The smile slipped off Julius's face. "Sad? Sad how?"

The boy frowned, an expression that looked like it belonged to a much older person, and shook his head. "Inside here," the boy pointed to Julius's head. "You are sad inside your head."

Lena had never seen the look that crossed her second lead's face before. It was a mixture of horror and relief, as if the boy had noticed something he'd never meant for anyone to see, yet was grateful that someone finally had.

The room fell quiet. It took a moment for Lena to realise the villagers' silence wasn't out of awkwardness or embarrassment at the boy's statement. Rather, it was the respectful hush that followed when an elder had said something particularly wise.

"Yes, well ... Okay," Lena cleared her throat and spoke quickly, eager to change the subject. She nodded at Abena and Ma Yesina, who were sitting together on the smaller settee. The younger woman was looking puzzled and wary, but the older woman had fixed the child with a look of burning curiosity. "Ms Mensa and Madam Byamukama will need somewhere to set up our equipment. I will also need a quiet place where I can conduct interviews."

"You can use the church," said the woman Lena recognised as Ama, the daughter of the village head. "We are not using it again."

"Why? Did something happen to it?" The question slipped out of Lena's mouth before she could catch it. It wasn't unheard of for a disgruntled community to assign the team to less than ideal quarters as a small way of striking out at people they regarded as government meddlers who might put their livelihoods at risk.

Ama looked surprised at the question. "Nothing happened. We don't need it anymore."

Lena had never encountered a rural community where the house of worship, whether it was a mosque or church, wasn't the heart of its social life. Sometimes, there was a community centre or a town hall that was used as a general meeting place, but if you wanted the beating heart of a place, it would always be wherever its people could find God. She glanced at Julius, knowing he'd share her surprise. But he wasn't looking at her. He had a faraway look on his face, as if his thoughts had turned inwards and he could no longer be reached.

"Please, eat," said Ama. "Your food will get cold."

*

The next day, the team woke early. Ezinne and her husband had vacated the house and gone to stay with their daughter the night before, leaving it free for the team's use. Sitting at the dining table, Lena picked at the breakfast of fried yam and egg stew that Ikenna had left for them and tried to articulate the discomfort that had dogged her since their arrival.

"What do you think they are hiding?" she directed the question to the table and was gratified that no one seemed surprised at her conclusion.

"They are probably just desperate to pass our inspection," said Samsudeen, who had yet to change from the kaftan and kufi he wore for morning prayers. "Every day they cannot go to market to sell their produce, they are losing money."

"But they seemed really happy to see us," said Abena. Only her voluminous bonnet was visible from behind her massive laptop screen as she scarfed down the contents of her plate. The young woman always ate as if the food would be snatched out of her hands at any moment. "They weren't faking that, were they? I mean, maybe the adults, but not the boy."

"If you ask my opinion, they were far too happy," said Ma Yesina, nursing her morning cup of coffee. It was a blend she made herself and brought with her whenever they were in the field. "I always suspect people who smile too much."

Lena looked to Julius for his opinion, but uncharacteristically he simply shrugged and stayed quiet. She frowned, but pressed on.

"Well, whatever it is, we'll find it. No be 'Number One Investigation Agency' we be?" Lena said, breaking out the old nickname they'd been given at the Ministry. She was relieved to see lightness return to their faces. Even Julius perked up.

"Na so!" her team chorused in response.

"Are you ready to go?" Lena startled at the new voice.

She turned to see Ama standing by the wide arch that marked the entrance to the dining area. How long had she been there—and why hadn't anyone heard her come in? She glanced back at her team and was gratified to see she hadn't been the only one caught unawares. Samsudeen's fair complexion had turned red with mortification at being caught essentially in his underclothes, and he hurried from the table without a word.

"Can you give us a few more minutes?" Lena tried to keep her voice steady. The woman wasn't due for at least another hour. Why had she turned up so early?

"E wo!" Ama appeared just as mortified as they were, and clapped her hands to her mouth, like a child who'd accidentally said a forbidden word. "Please eh, I am so sorry. Let me go and wait outside."

Before Lena could reassure her, the woman was gone.

What in the divine name of the Goddess was going on? Lena wondered as she too hurried to get ready for the day.

Half an hour later, the team followed Ama along the village's only major roadway as they headed to the church grounds on the outskirts of town. It was just past dawn, and the village was already awake. Last night's chill had yet to dissipate, and a thick grey fog clung to the tops of the smooth rock formations in the distance, shrouding the hills around them in a haze. Farmers wearing wide-brimmed straw hats stood out like dark insects against the deep green of the fields that stretched out beyond the red ochre of the main road.

Sabon Miri was a prosperous place—signs of its wealth were everywhere if one cared to notice. Its homes were solid mudbrick buildings freshly painted in bright colours, with low solar roofs hanging over wide verandahs. No crowds of women and children waited to fetch the day's water at its public taps. Its dirt paths were deliberately smooth and even, lined by sod-covered verges that absorbed rainwater, not open gutters. Where there would normally be refuse heaps, there were massive compost tumblers. Shade trees grew copiously in nearly every compound, as they hadn't been cut down for firewood.

Houses were clustered into family compounds of two or three homes set around an open courtyard. Unlike in other similar sized communities in this part of the country, there were no cactus fences demarcating each from the other. Lena did spot that each compound had its own granary, a tall, slim thatched-roof mud hut set in the middle of the courtyard.

The middle? Lena frowned at that. Granaries were usually tucked out of the way—behind a house or near the compound's shared outdoor kitchen. She made a note to check each of them during the course of the investigation.

Her normally chatty team walked in silence, their brief lightness at breakfast evaporated. Lena felt as if she was a child again, trudging to school beside her mother to her least favourite class. Desperate to lighten the mood, she seized on the first subject she could think of.

"Your father is a very good cook, tell him thank you for the food," she said to Ama.

"He will be so happy to hear you say that," Ama replied with amusement. "Before, he refused to even enter the kitchen, so when he first started cooking, nobody could eat his food. He was always burning everything!"

Lena laughed at this. "What made him decide to learn?"

"Our minds changed," said Ama simply.

Something about the way she phrased the sentence struck Lena as odd, but before she could puzzle it out, a group of men passing by called out in greeting. Their group responded in kind, and Lena noticed that the men were carrying cleaning supplies—long-handled rakes, raffia brooms, refuse baskets, and cutlasses. They had scarves tied around their necks and faces—no doubt to protect them from dust and other irritants. A sanitation crew. It wasn't unusual for communities to have their own public sanitation details, although in this part of Nigeria, they were usually staffed by women. What was strange was that this one had a gaggle of children among its members.

"Aren't those children going to school this morning?" asked Ma Yasina, after the group had passed. Though her question was far more direct than Lena would have put it, she shared the older woman's curiosity.

"A child doesn't only learn inside a school," said Ama, equitably.

"Unless you don't want them to know how to read and write," muttered Samsudeen, clearly still smarting from his earlier embarrassment.

Ama spoke lightly, but her words carried an iron weight. "Our children are learning how to farm and cook and clean. They are learning how to make the tools and the pots and plates that they use. We are teaching them how to carve masquerade masks and how to weave and dye and sew their clothes. Anything they want to learn, we are teaching them. We will not force them to sit for a final year exam, but when they finish, we will consider them graduates. Not because they will have a nice certificate to hang on their walls, but because they will be able to do things that will benefit the whole community. Our children are learning how to become human beings, rather than tools for big men in big cities who will use them as thugs and prostitutes."

She smiled and added, "Of course, they are *also* learning to read and write."

Lena didn't know what to say to that. It echoed a philosophy she had heard many times from her own mother, who'd championed a more indigenous approach to teaching than she had been allowed to practice. Her mother had insisted Lena learn a number of practical skills—not just cooking, but weaving, sewing, gardening, pottery, even basic carpentry, plumbing, and electrical repair. The woman had rarely instructed, though. Instead, she would make Lena immediately begin to practice the skill she wanted her to learn.

How many times had her mother simply pressed the necessary tool or instrument into Lena's hand, her only instruction being to "watch me"? Lena would then have to work to copy her mother's movements, with only one or two corrections to improve her form or technique. These lessons had no specific times or length, no assignments or deadlines. The only requirement for passing was to work on a single project until it was finished.

You must learn widely; just as our ancestors learned, her mother would say. *This is how you become a human being in the world.*

As if responding to her mother, Lena said, "That's all well and good, but if your children only learn the skills they need for this community, what will they do when it is time for them to leave? You should also prepare them to survive in the world."

"Why are you so sure that our children will leave us?" Ama's response was gentle, but there was a note of challenge in it. "Yes, there are some people who will always want to go outside and see what they can see, but if your own house is comfortable, why would you want to go and live inside somebody else's house?"

"Come, we are almost there." Ama continued forward, all pretense at casual conversation discarded. Lena shared a sceptical look with Ma Yasina and Samsudeen.

Soon, the wide field of the church compound came into view. It was marked by a rusting metal sign; the only words still legible on it read "Our Lady of Mercy". The church building was a long bungalow with wide arched windows; a square two-sto-

rey tower with a pyramid roof stood over its entrance. Lena noted that, though the building's windows were grime-free and unbroken, its whitewash paint had not been touched up and was now water-streaked. And while the roof appeared to be solid, unlike the other buildings in the village, it was made of old-fashioned zinc not modern solar tile. Just behind the church, across a short expanse of wild grass, Lena could see the church-run school was in a similar state: well-maintained, but disused.

Inside, the interior was empty of pews and benches, although a large crucifix still hung from the ceiling where the altar would have been. Members of yesterday's delegation were waiting with a few plastic chairs and tables they'd clearly brought in from elsewhere. As Lena's team unpacked their metal suitcases of testing equipment, they spoke only to pass information—no witty banter. Thankfully, the villagers had kept the church connected to the community's mini-grid, and they could plug in their datapads. Someone had even wheeled in a small fridge, even though Lena hadn't recalled specifically asking for one. It was something they often needed when in the field, but so rarely got that she'd learned not to bother trying to secure one. Just as they finished setting up, a group of ten children, led by the young boy from the day before, filed into the room.

In the light of day, Lena noticed that all the children were dressed in clean, brightly patterned tunics over skirts or trousers, not faded Western hand-me-downs, as was often the norm in rural communities in Nigeria. Their feet were clad in sturdy leather sandals, their eyes were clear, and their skin gleamed with good health. It struck her that all the children she'd seen so far were similarly robust. There were no signs of malnutrition or neglect in any child she'd seen so far. What struck her, though, was that she could not easily tell a child's gender. Both boys and girls wore their hair in plaited styles of various lengths and seemed to wear trousers or skirts indiscriminately.

"Dr Julius!" The young boy called out, running up to Lena's number two. "Did I help you? Did you sleep well?"

Julius, who had been oddly morose, lit up with the first genuine smile he'd shown all morning. "You helped me, yes. I slept very well, thank you."

"You see? I was right." The boy broke into a gap-toothed smile of his own.

Julius was one of those rare adults who didn't speak down to children—and they loved him for it. But Lena wasn't sure what this was referring to. She knew Julius had nightmares that often kept him from sleeping through the night. She was a light sleeper and would often be woken by the sound of him prowling through their camp or hotel when they were on assignment, but he rarely talked about his dreams, or the memories of war that might have spurred them. She resolved to ask him about it later. For now, there was work to do.

They spent the rest of the day combing through the community, collecting samples, interviewing witnesses, and observing the processes that the people of Sabon

Miri used when making their other fermented products. Although an Igbo enclave, the residents here hadn't shied away from adopting foods from the surrounding peoples, such as *massa* and *nunu* from the Hausa and Fulani populations, and *kunu* from the local Birom and Ngas people. They'd also continued to make their own *ogi* fermented from maize. This meant that there were a lot of different areas to cover.

Over dinner, the team reconvened to share their findings. Though they'd only surveyed a fraction of what they needed to cover, it was just as Lena feared: nothing. Nothing out of the ordinary on the farming equipment, on the fermentation tanks, or in the brewing vats, according to Samsudeen. The swabs taken from the animals kept on site—the goats and chickens—would need a few days to culture, reported Ma Yasina, but so far, they seemed normal.

Swabbing the cattle wouldn't be as easy. Sabon Miri's milk came from deals with a number of nomadic Fulani cattle herders whose migration paths crossed into the community. The herds were allowed to range and graze on fallow land in exchange for any milk they produced during their stay. This meant that there was no need to clear cut or use fertilisers on those tracts when cattle teeth and dung worked just as well, and the animals had a sanctuary space where they could fatten in peace for a time. It was a traditional practice that had fallen out of favour nearly a generation ago as access to land became politicised by corrupt leaders, and corporate interests had promoted the use of artificial fertilisers over animal dung. They would need to track down the herd that had been in the area during the initial outbreak.

Lena sighed, before catching herself.

"Yeah..." agreed Abena, who was looking over the aggregated data on her screen. Lena noticed she was sweating, though the day had cooled once more. "It doesn't look good."

"Maybe they cleaned things up when they knew we were coming," said Ma Yasina, pinching the bridge of her nose. Fatigue lined her face and betrayed her age.

"How? Did they wipe down every millet seed?" Samsudeen spoke from his prone position on the settee in the parlour. Ma Yasina threw him a sour look he didn't catch, as he had an ice pack over his eyes. He'd complained of a headache when he came in, and was now lying in the dark, his eyes sensitive to the lights even at their lowest setting.

"All of the children seem healthy," said Julius, the only person who seemed in a cheerful mood. "I cannot be hundred per cent sure until I see the results of the tests, but I have not seen anything to cause me concern."

"What of the reports of their 'strange behaviour'? Did you see anything like that?" asked Lena.

"The only thing that I saw was happy children who are feeding well," said Julius with equanimity.

“Not even the boy from yesterday?” Lena pressed. Something about the way he was acting seemed off. She had known Julius for nearly ten years—they had worked on teams together since she’d first joined the Ministry. He was gruff but amiable, his taciturn façade hiding a lively personality. What he generally wasn’t, however, was happy. But now he was almost beatific. His expression reminded her of the statues of Buddha seen in shops in Lagos’s China Town.

Julius’ peaceful expression faltered for a moment, but he recovered and shook his head.

“If he showed any symptoms before, I am not seeing anything now.”

Lena nodded, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that Julius wasn’t telling the whole truth. She chided herself for her mistrust. This man had saved her life more than once; if he was holding something back, there was probably a good reason. A new thought struck her.

“Did any of you see any evidence of those strange yam seeds from the photo? I couldn’t see any in the commercial storage units,” said Lena.

Ma Yasina shook her head and Samsudeen’s groan of “no” came from the couch.

“We’ve only surveyed twenty-five of the sixty household granaries; they might still turn up,” said Abena, flapping the sweat-dampened collar of her shirt.

Lena had asked Ama if the community was experimenting with any new strains or species. The young woman had only laughed in response.

“We are bringing back lost practices,” she’d said. “Our traditional cultivation and fermentation methods are not just practical techniques, they are our culture. They connect us to our ancestors in the past and to our generations in the future.”

It didn’t escape Lena that Ama hadn’t answered her question. She began to feel a headache building up behind her eyes.

Just then, they heard a knock at the front door. Their dinner had arrived.

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—Lena woke from sleep in a cold sweat. She wasn’t sure what had woken her; she blinked and looked around. The room was dark, but the window above her was open and the soft white light of the bioluminescent paths outside cast the furnishings in shades of silver. There was her personal altar on its finely carved stool; next to it stood a chest of dark red wood with her most precious belongings inside. A cool breeze blew through the room, ruffling the mosquito netting over the bed and rustling the woven tapestries on the wall. Beside her, a figure stirred sleepily and a small hand flung itself onto her pillow. Lena peered down to look at her daughter. The girl’s face was her own in miniature. From somewhere in the distance, a cock crowed, and she decided this was as good a time as any to get out of bed.

She left the bedroom quietly, careful not to wake her child. Soon, the rest of the family would wake and the house would be engulfed in the pleasant chaos that was

life with her cousins, aunties, and nibblings. Lena loved it, but she also liked taking a little time to herself in the mornings, it gave her a chance to reflect—to craft the stories and songs that were her lifeblood as a griot.

At this time of morning, the large common room should have been empty; the doors to the other bedrooms were still shut. Yet, she wasn't surprised to see her mother sitting on the floor in front of the large centre table in the middle of the room. She was sipping a cup of tea, a pot and an extra cup ready before her. Lena greeted her in Igbo and joined her.

The woman looked exactly as Lena often remembered her: large, black-framed glasses that dominated her face and made her eyes seem owlishly large, and wearing a long cardigan she'd knitted herself over a singlet and loose trousers. It was an outfit designed to soften and disarm. Underneath her loose clothes, her mother was tall and heavily muscular—built like a boxer, someone had once said. Her thick, silvery white dada hair was loose and cascaded down her back. As Lena topped up her mother's cup, then poured herself a cup of her own, something nagged at her—a note of disbelief at the scene— but she ignored it.

"You are looking tired, how are your studies?" her mother asked.

"It's not easy," Lena admitted.

"The work of spreading the light is never easy. You are surrounded by a Darkness that Consumes and is Never Satisfied and, like any living thing, it does not want to be extinguished. So, when you push against it, it will push back. It will do everything it can to continue to exist. It will lie and distort and distract. Worse, there is a piece of it inside you. See it for what it is, call it by its name, and then pass it by. Continue the work the Goddess called you to."

"What work is that?"

"You are a teacher; you are meant to recover the knowledge and practices that were destroyed by greed and hatred. Not to recreate them, but to rediscover what was best about them and blend them with the best of what we have today. Reshape them so that they can nourish and nurture, then pass them down to those who will come after you."

Lena thought of the child sleeping in her room. The little girl who would soon wake. What world would she find waiting for her when she emerged?

"If the Goddess called me to this work, then why does it feel so difficult? Why must I constantly fight myself just to make even the smallest progress? Why do I feel so alone?"

"Yours is a sacred responsibility—one that your spirit chose for itself before you ever incarnated into this plane. This means your spirit was tempered for this work. It was forged strong enough to bear its burdens; it will not break under them."

"But it is so dark right now, I can hardly see the way."

“A butterfly cannot see herself when she is still inside her cocoon. Have patience. But beware of the lie of perfection. Perfection is static. Once it is achieved, it can only degrade. Creation is fundamentally imperfect and dynamic. It is ever-changing, ever-growing, ever-experimenting. Its systems are constantly seeking that which will most consistently benefit the most. So must yours.”

“Will we succeed?” The question was a child’s cry.

“Why not?” her mother answered. “You already have everything you need to grow into who you will next become. Look to the soil under your feet. Your map lies there.”

From outside the window, Lena heard music. It was as if joy itself had become embodied in song. From the bedroom, she heard her child begin to wake; the whole house was coming to life.

“I guess it’s time to get back to work,” Lena told her mother. Her mother nodded in agreement. Before she got up to leave, Lena leaned over and hugged her mother one last time—

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—She woke with the feel of her mother’s strong arms around her shoulders.

Lena stumbled out of bed and out of the bedroom she shared with Ma Yasina and Abena. Her throat was dry, her eyes felt scratchy, and her whole body felt sore and weak, as if she’d just recovered from a bout of malaria. She found that the rest of the team was already awake and assembled in the parlour. They looked as drained as she felt. Through the room’s main window, she could see that the sky was grey twilight. Had a whole day passed?

Lena didn’t need any more evidence to understand what had happened. She turned to Ama and her parents, who were standing by the open front door, watching them impassively.

“You drugged us,” said Lena. She knew she should have been outraged, but oddly, she wasn’t. “What was it? LSD? Iboga? Psilocybin?”

“We don’t know its name,” said Ama. “Some years ago, it started growing on all of our crops—the millet, the yam, the maize, even the vegetables. We tried to destroy it. Every method you can imagine—cooking, sterilising, salting, drying—we tried it. Nothing, nothing. It was inside the soil. Anything that grew here, it was inside. In the end, I had a dream. Eke, the Great Mother, visited me and told me that we should just eat the food like that. So we started eating it.”

“We are the ones who called Dr Abel,” said Ezinne, Ama’s mother. “We told him what it was doing to us. It changed all of us, but it was changing the children the most.”

They were savvy. A report about a few villagers in rural Nigeria getting sick would have been lost amid the churn of other, more important, investigations. But a po-

tentially new type of mycotoxin primarily affecting children? Ministry researchers would be stumbling over themselves to get to it.

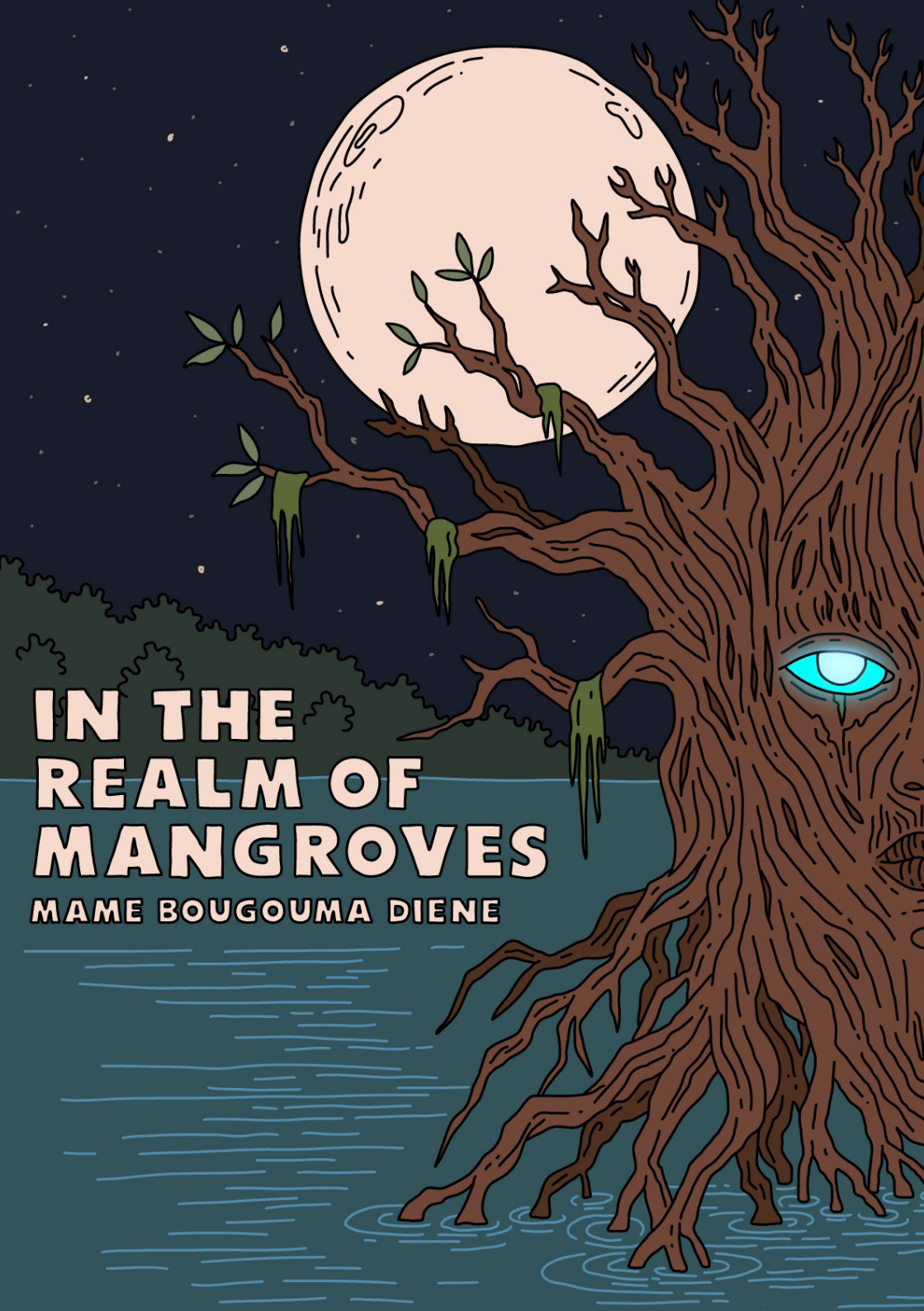
Lena felt nauseous and sank down into a chair that someone had thoughtfully placed behind her. Ikenna was handing her a glass of water before she could ask for it.

"We trusted that the Goddess would send us the people we needed," said Ama. "She sent you."

"Will you help us?" Ikenna asked. His voice was warm and gentle. She could imagine it thundering orders like her father's once had, but she knew it would not. If this voice could change, what else could be transformed?

Lena looked over at her team. Somehow, she knew they'd already been asked—and that they'd already answered. She gulped down her glass of water.

"Why not?"



IN THE REALM OF MANGROVES

MAME BOUGOUMA DIENE

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BY MAME BOUGOUMA DIENE

The dead don't die in Africa.

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The bats shrieking between moonlit canopy of leaves and gleaming red fruit conspired with the gods to quell his screams, their seven-foot wings pounding the air, marking his passage as a funeral rite. He flashed back to when he was an embryo being nurtured in gnarled mangrove roots; now the thorny ground was tearing bloody furrows across his back, his fellow villagers pulling on the liana cutting into his wrists as they dragged him towards where he'd been born.

When he looked up, Hebyoussou looked down upon him, marbled skin cracked like stone. His bull-shaped head snarling under eye sockets burning red. Waiting to judge him. To change him.

"Sènakpon, child of the roots. Born of the Kwaito. Do you confess to murder?"

"I do! Please. Don't do this to me, please!"

"He's confessed before the eyes of the god."

"Don't." His screams turned to sobs. "I'll never do it again. I promise. I'll do anything. Just. Don't. Do this to me!"

But he knew by the dry eyes staring down at him that there'd be no mercy. No more than for his victims.

He kicked and bit, his body lifting off the ground. The smell of the swamp growing stronger, the creaking branches digging into the water through the soil beneath, into the heart of the world, opening a greedy maw to crush his bones.

“No!”

His plunge into the waters lasted only an instant as the god conjured a bolt of lightning into his chest. The bones in his legs calcified instantly, dislocating every joint, tearing at his skin, growing and warping and twisting again. He could feel roots latching onto him, pulling him deeper into an embrace much like love, but worse than death.

*

If not for floating patches of rotting grasses, the waters would reflect the skies, or perhaps the opposite.

She'd often wondered: which came first? The waters or the sky? The Elder Mothers said the sky had. Why? Because, silly child. Because.

The faces in the bark held their eyes closed, mild smiles on their lips, as the Birthers dived deep into their roots to extract the babies gestating inside them in bubbles of sap and oxygen. It's an odd world where people can't give birth, but trees can birth people. But of course these trees had been human once; perhaps even more so now.

A two-headed python slithered from the leaves, wrapping its pinkish-blue body around one of the canoes, rocking it, the babies' cries turning to giggles and light snoring.

She stood and snapped her fingers at the young boy handling the craft.

“Take this one back. Dangbe blessed them. And so you. Take the rest of the day off.”

“Thank you, Mother!”

She nodded, just as she had seen council members do.

“Agbodji!”

“Yes, Mother,” she replied, eyes downcast.

“The council meeting is about to start. We will need a full account on the number of new births within the hour.”

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“...so the latest count of flamingoes stands at two hundred and thirty-two. Four hundred and forty-four turtles migrated home to lay eggs, that's down two hundred and twenty from when they birthed, but a higher return than last year. Fifty caiman sightings. More may hide in the deeper roots. We might have to cull them before they eat the babies...”

Hogs were next. Poultry, cattle, produce, fruit: how much had been lost to wasting sickness, how many animals had deformities, and which kind. The oh so boring but oh so important tally of resources and people in the tribe.

That was where the learning was, they told her. The dull details, the seemingly empty litany of numbers, shapes, names. If you don't believe us, ask the warriors you like so much. You see them spear-chucking and wrestling, glistening with sweat, and you let your mind wander. Do you know how long they stay motionless, squatting until their thighs burn?

She did, actually. Djimon wouldn't shut up about it.

"Thank you Mother Mahuna," Eldest Mother Kande started. "But it's meaningless without the birth rate. Agbodji, stop daydreaming. You'll have time for boys later."

How did they always know? But then the hags had their heyday. Maybe they were even pretty once. Maybe she'd be ugly too one day, looking at a young girl whose promise she'd envy.

"A good yield today, Mother. Seventy-two newborns. A python slithered down to rock one of the boats."

They grunted approval. The python promised long life to those newborn: strength, intelligence and talents, though not all, and not in equal measure.

Mother Kande didn't join the chorus.

"Seventy-two," she said "Bringing our total population to how much, Mother Mahuna?"

Mahuna shrugged.

"That's the problem. We can't keep track. Members of the community are spreading further along the coast. Congregating in the more fertile areas. And they're having children of their own. They don't all ring true, but enough of them do..."

That last statement caused a rumble. Giving birth was their privilege. The very reason why they existed. To give birth to the gods. Of sorts...

"...ours is a delicate dance. There is only so much pressure we can exact on the mangrove before running out of resources. Of new children. You see what I'm getting at..."

Agbodji wasn't sure she did, but nodded anyhow.

"Thank you, Agbodji. Thank you all. We'll reconvene when the scouts return."

*

Djimon winked at her as he picked his wrestling partner off the ground, slung him over his shoulder and slammed him back into the dust, muscles gleaming with sweat under the purple evening sky.

The mothers warned her against this on a weekly basis.

Wasn't he dreamy, though?

Agbodji let her mind wander so deep she blushed. The wrestling bout now over, Djimon nudged her with a playful push of his sandal, his outline gigantic against the darkening sky.

"I don't even wanna know," he said.

The grass grew thicker nearer the water, alive with the buzzing of flies and twilight bite-mes. It wouldn't take long for night's hammer to drop, but for now they were just two teenagers in love, revelling in the space in-between.

"You sure you wanna go through with this?" he blurted. "I know you say it's important to you, but are you sure?"

"I am," Agbodji answered. "You worried I'm not gonna choose you? You don't have to be. I get to choose my mate. And I'm not choosing anyone but you."

"I'm not worried about *that*, but what happens if you don't make it? What am I supposed to do then?"

"You go on living and find someone less foolhardy."

"That's not good enough for me."

"I'll be fine. Let's not worry about this now. OK?" She laughed and leaped up to kiss him.

"I'll walk you home."

"No, we're having another council meeting. I'll swing by afterwards. Deal?"

"Deal. But don't bother waking me up if I'm sleeping. I'm not mad or anything, it's just been a back-breaking day."

There was so much more they wanted to say. But there always is. You can't always have it all, but right here and now, they had this, and that was worth a lifetime.

*

Enangnon leaped over the log, leading the band through the growing thickets of trees.

He had a good feeling about tonight, the fingertips holding his lightning spear tingling.

"Femi, spread right. Bignon, left." He signed at the two men a few yards behind him. "Ten men each."

The Osindo gathered babies today. Meanwhile his tribe needed fresh blood every few years.

He'd be lying if he said the crying of the babies didn't yank at his chest every time, but what option did they have?

The Osindo had everything. Trees, edible roots, drinking water. Fowl, fish, hogs, monkeys, salt and spices. And they never spared a thing.

Growing up on ancestral stories of how his people had risen from the rusted ruins of the past to the barren wasteland, competing over who would be sacrificed for the

greater good of the tribe. Sent to scavenge from the poisonous plains up north. To be roasted and eaten. To live on in the tribe's hearts.

The stories taught them it was the highest honour, but Enangnon was no fool. He knew exactly where food ended. There was no honour in that.

So swift were they, not a single bird trembled, not a bat took off. Only the drops of sweat dripping from his brow pitter-pattered against the bushes.

The Osindo looked down on them for their feeding habits, but they were no better than them. They thought they were superior because they owned so much. They were expecting his band to arrive later, and to be smaller. The Osindo grew wary when they weren't attacked. That's what greed gets you. Disquiet.

They swarmed past the blueish-grey statue, white-faced and long-horned, smiling at them.

Another of their strange gods.

But there was only one god.

Theirs.

And his teeth were sharp and his need ravenous.

*

His eyes opened to the creaking of bark and pungent wind.

There'd been the slithering caress of his lover's lower branches against his. That was *Before*. Before the villagers had hacked her to pieces—of that he was certain.

How long had he slept this time?

And who was he?

There were other trees, newer. He could tell by the messages they shared through their roots. Their tears. Begging for just one more chance.

Had he cried too before? Leaking sap through his eye slits along his cracked cheeks? Had he licked them up to hide his pain?

Pain; she had felt it before the end. Long before the end.

There were birds nesting in his hair. Dotting his foliage like strings of cowry.

Cowry. That sounded familiar. Cowry. Yes. Strings of cowry shells through his braids.

That was a voice. I. Cowry shells though my braids.

They took her away whole. Ripped her from the waters and chopped her to logs. Why did they do that? They had grown old together, good together.

There was a scream through the roots. All the birds in the branches flying off at once, a flash of light, an orange blaze and a whoosh of heat blowing through the murky forest.

Weapons firing and people surging, chasing animals ahead of the flames, casting shadows into crevices. He saw hunger in their eyes, and something he had felt too once. And just as hungrily.

Murder.

"Oh. Right ... I remember now."

*

Papata grinned at Agbodji as she walked into the tent. *I know your deepest thoughts* that grin told her. *I know how much you'd love to slap that grin off my face.* She didn't expect him to spin on her and flash his frowning face. That was bad. Or not. Papata liked to play with you. *I know what you're doing on one side, and I don't like it one bit on the other.*

The spy of kings. Towering over man and beast, he sees all and knows all.

If she was lucky, she'd deliver something like him. A god.

If not, a stillborn, or a mutant for the wastelands.

At worst, Djimon's fears would come true, except she wouldn't be here to know. Because she'd be dead.

The same deformities that curse natural-born children sometimes turned powerful, if short-lived. Only the mangrove babies birthed true. Why? It didn't matter as long as they birthed true. There were odd things in this world.

Take Papata. His severe face was located only a few hands above his butt. Maybe that's where the frowning came from. She grinned back at him. And was that just a passing shadow of doubt on his face? That she knew his secret shame?

No one said being a god was easy.

Papata and Eldest Mother Kande stood in the middle of the circle of mothers, incense smoking around them, Kande's hand patting him playfully on the cheek, giggling at his frozen grin.

Like mother like son.

Kande clapped her hands three times.

Papata leaped into the circle, spinning, flashing both sides of his face to the audience in turn. The more theatrical he was, the less serious the news.

"I hear news from beyond the woods. I come bearing news from the wastelands."

"We are gathered to hear them."

"Are you ready to do what must be done?"

"We are."

"Whether you like the news or not, do you stand ready to do what must be done?"

"We do."

"Even at the cost of your lives?"

"We do."

All protocols observed, Papata sat, folding his legs.

"Then you have earned my account."

The reports were always the same.

The Xwedo were our perennial enemy, yet symbiotic. They depended on us for sustenance besides their own flesh. We depended on them for the strange weapons they wielded. The deformed babies we abandoned, they took in. For what purpose, any guess would do.

They never made it far past the older, rotting groves on the far edges of the settlements, before the warriors killed a few and they took a few of ours before vanishing into the foggy waste they call home.

Tonight would be no different.

They'd attack in the early morning. The warriors were receiving instructions for ambush. Djimon would not be getting the sleep he wanted.

She would sleep through it and tend to Djimon's sore muscles come morning, and that would be that; another council, another tally, case closed.

Another waste of a fine evening for no stupid...

The horns blared warning of the attack moments before the thunderclap of explosions flung Papata and the Mothers' bodies to the ground like bags of rice, the tent behind them catching fire.

*

As far as Agbodji knew, she and Djimon were getting married. She'd delivered not one god, but two. Twins, if they could be called that. But gods they were and now her duties were done, she got to choose. Either remain on the Council, celibate forever, or live free with the man of her choosing.

She didn't let the Mother finish the question before stepping out of the tent.

You lost me at forever.

Her marriage day: sunny, broken by lightning storms, Djimon in his blue caftan, waving her towards him to join the frenzy of the dance.

She let him spin her to the ululations of their guests, their frenzied screams, the rumbling thunderclaps, the enticing smell of meat grilling and through it all, his voice calling her.

"Agbodji! Agbodji!"

And that's when she opened her eyes, her stomach aching from the smell of roasting Mothers.

*

His roots burst out under the ankles of an intruder, slamming his body face down into the damp, black soil. His thin branches slithered and wrapped around the body, squeezing it into a cocoon until it burst, soaking his roots and into the heart of him.

It felt good to kill again. After all this time lost to his past, he knew his self once more.

Whether the other trees felt the same, he didn't know. This was the old mangrove. They were sinners like him, or so had the mothers deemed them. However they felt, judging by the muffled gurgles of throats gorged with muck ... the killing was good.

*

"Keep your eyes closed!"

Her chest resting against Djimon's back, she wanted to hang on to the dream a little longer. Maybe if she dreamed long enough, it would become real.

She opened her eyes anyway.

The mangrove running along the coast burned. Smouldering bodies lay in clusters. Screaming villagers were being dragged by the Xwedo, hideous beasts twice the size of their biggest warriors, fire and thunder ringing from the tubes in their hands.

"They hit multiple spots along the coast," Djimon went on, his voice low. "I don't know how they co-ordinated this ... the boats and bridges are on fire, they bombed the islands with those new weapons of theirs, they just broke apart in the water ... they're burning the mangrove to scare the animals out, they're dragging young girls away..."

She'd never heard him like this. Lost. He knew every nook of the land and stashed a few things in various crannies—almonds and sweets and memories—but right then, they were as foreign to him as the village looked to her.

"Are we gonna die here?" Agbodji asked.

"No." He slid her off his back. "We're not gonna die. There's more of us, they're running out of ammo, the explosions have almost stopped. We'll kill most of them, hold a few for questioning and then kill them, but this is bad, Agbodji and ... when they come back next time..."

He was right; the warrior's cries were spreading beyond the burning houses. The intruders weren't just shooting away, they were killing a way out for themselves.

How much had they lost? How long did they have to recover? Could they? Agbodji finally understood what the mothers meant with their stream of tedious numbers. She had all those numbers in mind, and now it made no difference.

This is the...

A twig behind them cracked, too quiet for kindness.

The shot rang out just as they turned their heads.

*

His eye blinked once, his tear drawing a sooty rivulet along his nose and cheek. He'd expected tears of joy perhaps, quickly wiped before seen, a stupid grin on his face.

Not the sting of smoked defeat.

Enangon's ankle stung where the root had lashed out and latched on to him, his eye on a baby boar. He hadn't thought to look for snakes, much less for trees.

He'd shot it out of reflex, the severed limb slithering back, spraying acid sap all over his lower leg.

The bruises didn't burn, but the sight of these two lovers locked in a fight their eyes betrayed? That did.

Houefa had melted away after returning from the wastes. Her soul dissolved, her skin leaking in boils off her bones, her gaze so steady, so black, so deep with no lids to blink her tears. She hurt, but couldn't speak it, fighting a long-decided battle against herself. In the end, even that gaze was gone. He had looked for her in those cave-dark eyes for days and nights through the wheezing morning when her breathing stopped, but she'd already left.

He didn't know if somewhere in there she had known, seen, tried to bleed a word to him for the blink she couldn't. Had her tears dried up for him?

There will be punishment for his defeat tonight; they could have their win, but they couldn't have what he didn't.

They can't have it all.

They can't have love.

Her first. He would burn as she did. He would watch her light fade forever in his arms.

This one's for you, Houefa, he thought, snapping a small twig under his foot and shooting.

*

The bullet missed Agbodji by less than a thumb as they turned towards the crackling branch, taking Djimon's face with it in magenta mist.

The second bullet took her in the shoulder before she could scream.

The third grazed her cheek and took her ear so she couldn't hear herself, her face a mix of her lover's blood and her own.

The fourth bullet went up her other cheek and into the roof her mouth, ricocheting inside her skull, exiting under her eye as the ground closed in on her.

*

What happened? She scrambled to think, her head heavy with stupor, two words her whole language, her body an anchor tethering her drowsy mind, trying to tell her something through the fog of medicinal herbs clouding the hut above her.

The last thing she remembered was the blast rocking the hut and diving into a burning abyss. Something had happened in between, but what? Where were the

other Mothers? Was she the lone survivor? Of what? What could have done that, and...

"Djimon!" She tried to scream, her cheeks beginning to tear open under her bandages.

The branch cracking, the hulking youth, his one eye caught in shadow, raising a weapon. Djimon. He'd gotten in the way. In the bullet's way. If the branch hadn't snapped... She pushed herself up with her one good arm, stumbling forward, following the soft draft, pushing the thin curtain into the aftermath.

The moon was almost in its first quarter. She'd been out for six days. Djimon had been dead for six days.

You said we wouldn't die. You never said you wouldn't. Maybe if you'd just said it.

Every house left standing had a slash of red across its door. The few people on the street hurrying towards a voice rising over a hubbub rising nearby.

Mother Kande. She had made it. Pragmatic to a fault. Some might even call her extreme. But she was kind. Kind to each and every one she met. It was people as a whole she didn't think much of.

"...we will recover..."

The crowd grumbled over her.

"...we will! See the tree behind me? It survived and so shall we..."

"What if they come back?" someone yelled. "We hide in the tree?"

This wasn't an assembly; it was a riot waiting to happen.

Agbodji shoved her way through the crowd. She could barely stand, but she could help, damn the gasps at the blood-stained bandages wrapping her face. She was a Mother too, or would be soon enough.

The look on Mother Kande's face as she broke into the firelit circle sucked the blood back into her wounds. The ruthlessness in those eyes held no kindness at all. But they were content.

Agbodji was everything she'd been waiting for.

"You are right," she said. "We can't hide in the branches any more than we can afford to be naïve."

The crowd whispered acquiescence.

"We can't be weak; we can't let ourselves become..." she trailed off, turning towards Agbodji.

She didn't need to finish her sentence, they all understood who she meant. So did Agbodji.

"We have to be strong. Stronger than we ever were."

She looked down at Agbodji. This is how she helped. By taking the fall.

Agbodji's legs gave up under her.

"Take her back to her hut." Mother Kande ordered. "But do not hurt her. We must be strong, but not cruel."

*

Agbodji skinned the rodent and set it to roast, keeping the fire low.

There were others.

What bonded them was hunger.

Most castouts left in the first few days. Whole families following a loved one into the wilderness. A few stayed back, scavenging the forest around the village, sleeping in the hollowed-out hulls of charred homes.

And more streaming past every few days, hurrying on their way to find something of their own.

The Xwedo hadn't returned for easy pickings, but it didn't stop them from picking each other out.

Agbodji wanted to leave too. Whatever was out there couldn't be worse than half-life on home's leftovers. But it wasn't home anymore: the Mothers made it clear. They hadn't been cruel. They had let her wounds heal for two more weeks. The herbs and incantations mended some of the tears in her body, but some things were broken forever.

She couldn't lift her right arm higher than her chest. The eye the bullet exited out of under twitched and leaked and blurred. She could eat and chew, but only tiny and tender morsels at a time. She had lost most of her sense of smell and taste, and her missing ear still made her nauseous when she had to run.

She wouldn't last a day out there. At least these woods were familiar, at least here she could scavenge the village's garbage heaps. This was who she was now. All she has now was her name and her scars.

Agbodji.

That name traced back to someone strong.

Someone who may not even have existed, except in her head and Djimon's eyes.

She gasped at how long since she'd thought of Djimon. At first her weeping had drawn the others. Now she thought he was the lucky one. In just over five weeks, he'd gone from being a hole in her heart to just an empty hole. The young warriors had come to find her at first, berries and fruit in remembrance of him. They stopped coming as the number of castouts grew, as screams echoed in the night, silenced by lightning.

An arrow slammed into the trunk behind her. The others had found her.

She picked up her small burlap sack, heading deeper into the woods, towards the sea and the old, rotting mangroves.

*

She wanted to believe the boggy smell of the mangrove marshes drew the tears from her eyes. That her leaky eye was catching on.

She didn't want to acknowledge the truth. She was going to die. The inevitability of it crushed her like the humidity of the swamp, like the sting of mosquitoes, like the burn in her throat from the brackish water. She hadn't eaten in days, and by tomorrow she'd be too weak to hunt anymore.

The old grove spread around her. Hundreds of years old, left behind as the village moved on. Darker, grimmer, their branches crooked, the leaves of their hair brownish and balding.

And everywhere she stepped, dead limbs jutted out of the ground.

She was going hungry by design. She wouldn't eat... Or so she thought now; if she didn't die in her sleep, she feared she would wake up finding herself gnawing on...

"You can cry if you think it'll help. It won't. I would know I wept for ... four hundred years? But you can."

A gravelly voice boomed over her, carrying the scent of damp leaves. Creaking from somewhere deep in time, the words heavily accented and misshapen, as if the ... person uttering them was learning to talk again.

"Who's there?" She squealed, leaping up, ready to strike come what may.

She missed that feeling.

"Me." The answer came with the wind.

Agbodji looked up to dark, electric-blue eyes staring at her from the tree above her. Its lips twisted along the folds of its bark into a sneer.

"You're not weeping anymore."

In all her years tending the mangrove, none had ever spoken. Their faces restful, their roots intertwined like lovers. The trees were happy.

But not this one.

*

"They should've killed me," Enangnon thought out loud, flashing his torch at a lump of rusty cables. A draft blew in from the cave opening ahead of them, stretching hundreds of feet over head, supported by gigantic metal structures, creaking under the weight of the roof.

He'd heard the legends. That they lived here once, that this ... tomb, was home. Whatever it was, it was long dead, and by the looks of it had never been truly alive. Twisted metal their past.

There had to be a better future.

"They'll find out soon enough," Gbedo responded, coughing bloody phlegm.

After two weeks in a cage, no one would follow him, save the few who preferred scavenging the old tunnels over getting sent north.

A dozen hodge-podge kids, all sentenced to a slow death. He couldn't dream of a better army.

Their logic was simple and suicidal. Their weapons came from the tunnels and grottos of their ancestry. Somewhere in this prehistoric underworld of caves lay the key to flipping their world on its head. They would never send anyone to die in poisoned fields again. They'd never know the taste of human flesh ever again either.

Or they would die trying. That was the deal they made.

"Enangnon!" Gbedo's raspy whisper floated through the cave. "I think I've found something."

*

Suspended ten feet in the air, its branches stretching her limbs to breaking point, she felt the tree's eyes boring into her.

"You look like one of them," it said, dropping her to the pulpy ground. "But you're not."

Agbodji grunted.

"One of who?"

The tree flung one of its branches towards a body protruding from the mud.

"Them," he said. "But yours are wounds. Theirs weren't. They were born that way."

"They attacked here too?"

"The other trees helped. It helped us. I felt alive again. For the first time in so long."

This was a killer. And a happy one. But she felt repentance there, a longing, a loss.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

She hesitated. "I was cast away. Entire families were. The Mothers ... it's a culling ... they are sacrificing people, the warriors told me. Turning people into trees against their will. They are scared of what might happen if the Xwedo come back. Scared of ... of losing control."

The tree chuckled.

"So it's happening again?"

Again?

"Who are you?"

"It wouldn't mean anything to you. Whoever I was is lost in time. There is no record of me. Just me, as I am now."

A cryptic. Great.

"A name you went by, maybe?"

It barked a crackling laugh.

"Whatever it was you survived," it answered, "your persistence is the reason."

She started to speak, but a thin branch landed on her lips like a finger.

"I am not the first, just one of them. By the time I stopped weeping, from the sap now flowing through me, from the roots tethering me to the waterbed ... and realised I was not alone ... two hundred years had passed..."

Agbodji slapped a millipede crawling up her leg. *All I asked for was your name...*

Her feet in the water, his branches on her toes, she wasn't hearing his words, they appeared as a filmy imprint, playing against the night sky, clouds floating through a thin, green forest of dark waters growing clearer, and the tears of dozens of young trees, fizzling in the waters. People collecting pods of babies. But there was no ritual, no village, just the destitute clinging to the only hope that they had.

Familiar and alien, a prototype of their now. The Mothers' robes shredded by use, their bodies deformed. A long time ago...

"...I didn't hear her scream as they tossed her in the water beside me. She drowned in my roots and morphed into herself, our roots connecting deep in the soil... Her tears turned my pain to comfort, her heartbeat mixing with mine as we slept here for lifetimes..."

The images seared inside her mind. She touched her cheeks expecting them wrinkled by the lives she was living and the erosion of infinite storms.

It was an honour to turn into a tree. It was a calling. Or had been.

"...You weren't always who you thought you were. Neither was I..."

She was so weak. She needed sleep, healing, food, anything at all...

A thin branch dangled a large blue fish.

"You will have to eat it raw..." he trailed off, Agbodji's teeth already buried into it. "You remind me of her. Eat and rest. I will whisper into your dreams. There is much you need to know ... about yourself, about your ... enemies..."

She gulped down a chunk of flesh, tiny bones grating her throat. He bled a cup of fresh water from his bark into a leaf. She snatched it and drank it, drowsiness taking over, her head dipping towards a pillow of leaves.

"What ... was your name?"

He breathed in the heavy night air.

"I was... I am... Sènkpon. The once and future killer."

"Sènkpon." She repeated as the world went soft and warm, his branches closing around her. "And hers?"

"I don't know," he responded "I never cared to ask. And they took her from me ... for firewood. I should have mourned, but I didn't. I didn't hate them for it... I hated her. I envied her..."

"What did you envy?" Her voice fading.

"...Her freedom..."

*

...The Elder Mother stood on a mound glowing emerald against the blend of orange and pink sunset. Behind her, a circle of smiling youth, breathing in the last wind they would feel as human.

The crowd stared at Hebyoussou. His twisted body under his bull-like face, the skies growing dark, crackling with silent lighting and empty thumps of thunder.

"The day has come to let go of the old ways. To settle and build, rediscover our culture, leave the old groves of the condemned and embrace the blessing of life." The Mother waved at the youth. "See how they smile. See how the heavens gather to grant their wish of oneness and immortality Rejoice for the new world about to birth. But remember where we came from, and never forget."

The procession to the waters began. Bolts of lightning striking as they stepped into the water.

Standing in the sweaty anonymity of the crowd, her vision streaked with afterglow, Agbodji didn't know what they weren't to forget, but looking at the mad light in the crowd's eyes, the eagerness to move on, she wasn't so sure they wanted to remember at all...

*

...Pyres lit the coast and islands, the stars blinked out of sight to offbeat chanting and the rumble of thunderclaps.

Agbodji looked at a once-familiar scene: the heralding of the time of the gods.

Darker gods.

Hebyoussou's eyes shining. The bleeding tributes huddled by the pyre, shaking. Their eyes downcast against the snarls and spit of the nearest onlookers.

"Murderers!"

"Rapists!"

"Thieves!"

Pressure surged against her back. The crowd rushed forward. Her knees hit the ground, someone stumbled over her, her face hit the dirt...

"Halt!" A woman's voice roared over them. "The gods have answered our sacrifices. Anybody who attempts to exact revenge will earn the same fate."

Pulled up by the shoulders, Agbodji caught her breath, her head ringing.

The ancient ones had used trees to stem the tides, still the waters, draw in life and flourish. With Hebyoussou's powers, the guilty would become their trees in turn.

The gods, dark as they were, had answered. But their price was still pain...

*

...Agbodji didn't know what she carried in her sleeves, bundled against the searing wind. Ahead of her a silent procession of men and women, hauling carts of metallic con-

traptions, vials of greenish liquid, and heaps of dried meat ... and little bundles hugged to their chests.

She stumbled on a stone, the smell of the soil heavy with rain. It had changed over the past few days. Softer on their calloused feet. Dead gritty crust, dusty powder that scratched their lungs to bloody phlegm was all they'd ever known. Several had died, but there was no turning back now. The others wouldn't let them back, not alive.

Someone caught her arm. "Watch your step," a man said. "You'll drop the baby."

"What's that smell?" She coughed, the child staring eyeless into her own, fixated on something behind her irises, until she felt little memories shifting, blending and creating new ones. She pushed them away, the vessels in her eyes bursting under the strain.

Don't look at them. They are not just babies. They are the gods.

Someone had tried to kill one. Screaming to get out of her head, to stop the lightning from blasting the ground around them. She dropped it and tried to stomp it. It lay on the ground chirping, her foot hovering a few inches over its head. It giggled and waved its hand. She went flying backwards into a rock.

"It's life," the man answered. "Oddly aggressive, isn't it? But that's how it should be. Fighting to live against the decay around it. Life finds a way and so will we."

"You really believe that?"

He nodded. Agbodji noticed the open scar across his face. That was the curse they were fleeing, the metal shackles around the caves still glowing, embers of a war lost to memory. The riches they stowed, the rotting death they delivered.

"I do. We have the machines. We have the knowledge. We have the will."

"But how can the children be our gods if we create them?"

He chuckled.

"What we do now doesn't matter. What matters is how we remember, or rather how we forget. Do you even know how we came to be this way? No one does, and it's better that way. We are who we are now and when we've shaken that? When we've buried the machines somewhere along the way in new temples to old hearts? All we'll remember is magic..."

*

"... Turn on the TV! The Big Announcement is coming."

Etienne had barely slept in days and couldn't shut up about it. He hadn't changed his clothes either.

"I don't know," Agbodji said, tipping her glasses to scratch her eye. Even on the seventy-second floor, there was nowhere you could breathe properly anymore. "Socials are all about how it could cause a chain reaction and level civilisation flat."

He patted her on the head.

"My big sister the conspiracy theorist. Honestly, even if it did, how could it be any worse?"

It seemed to her that every time people moved forward, the world died a little. First the insects, then the plants, then the birds, then the cattle. It was a world of carnivores now, human and animal alike. To replace pollinators, they built nanobugs and those bugs ate through the few plants left. They lined the sea wall with protective mangrove trees, but the chemicals poured into the ocean ate the trees and seeped into aquifers.

Scientists said the same thing too. The slightest miscalculation in growing depleted uranium seeds could affect the balance of nuclear power plants. She didn't understand it all, but she knew playing god when she saw it. And gods don't play.

So yes, it could get much worse.

As for the Big Announcement? Anticlimax. Seeding would go ahead. One problem at a time. Feeding forty-two billion living beings on recycled water for decades was bad enough.

When she woke up, the world hadn't self-imploded. After a week, the conspiracy socials went dark. After a month, the first saplings started to grow, a few months ahead of schedule.

When she fell asleep, a few hours after celebrating her nineteenth birthday, she didn't hear the explosions rippling through the city, she didn't feel the flames...

...And in a flash she caught a glimpse of a world so far back in time it might have never existed.

Simple houses and simple homes. Simple people and simple clothes. By waters a blue so true it shone. Fires of crackling wood and songs of beating drums, like the heartbeats of heroes long gone. Spears and knives and shields and swords all banging together to name a newborn.

All these thousands of years ago. Lost in mind, memory and soul, except for her and the leaves blowing away in the wind...

...And clearly as she saw the past she caught a glimpse of the future. Something not quite real.

A future that wasn't theirs. A future that wasn't the Xwedo's.

A future that was both. Or neither's.

A future that could be. A future that had to be. If it didn't come into being, just like the past, there would be no future at all.

*

Agbodji burst open from the thin cocoon of branches, déjà vu burning into her bones. This was now. She was quite sure. All that happened before. Or perhaps all at once, just a thin veil away from touch, impossibly far out of reach.

"Like what you saw?" Sènanapon chuckled.

"We were the same people?" She whispered, legs shaking. "The same people..."

"The exact same. That's what's tricky with the word 'people'. It only means what you want it to."

“... and none of this is magic?”

“No. Weapons-grade uranium.”

Agbodji wasn't scared anymore. Sènkpon wouldn't harm her. But she was getting annoyed with him again.

“I get it. You can't help yourself. You never have. That's why you're here. You were some kind of criminal and thought you'd outsmart everybody. Until they caught you. Now you make up for it by being as damned annoying as you can? Did I get it all?”

Sènkpon paused to think.

“Close enough, but I don't think I'm smarter than you, I am. You missed something. Or rather you omitted it. It's not just you. Everybody does. But you focused on things outside of yourself. You didn't question your own beliefs. Despite what led you here. If you had, you would have reached the conclusion...”

“We never needed the sacrifices, did we?”

“Yes. We grow seeds as we grow children. We're both man and tree. The world's living memory. We could seed the world again, if only you let us.”

“So what should I do now?” She thought out loud, knowing the answer full well.

*

Enangnon watched the procession of Elders and their families marching towards the blasted lands with a bittersweet heart, but it had to be done. Time to think and start anew.

What the screen had shown...

The radiant sunsets and green grass over hills and valleys dotted with trees and water and life. Those things riding the winds, riding the water, flashing bright lights down roads. The fullness of face of the people, their clothes, their food...

All those things were real and yet they were not. A play of sorts. Fake, yet more real than life.

It was fake because it was a story, it was real because it spoke a truth. It was true because it was beautiful.

That world had existed. It could again. It would if he could find the beauty at his fingertips.

They lied to them. For fifty generations or more. Send them north to die. Forced them to feed on each other, dead as they walked.

It wasn't that couple's fault Houefa had died. Shooting them had meant nothing. Nothing at all.

Hundreds streamed in and out of the caves. Walked towards the truth and left to draw their own conclusions. Silent and pensive they came out. Stunned into silence, weeping until their eyes bled.

Enangnon approached the Elders' proclamation chair. A clunky, rusty, pock-marked metal thing crumbling at the edges.

He hadn't thought he should rule, not even as he sat on the chair, but he saw the gaze of the others change. And there was nothing he could do to change it back.

"Enangnon," Gbedo wheezed as he rushed in. "It's the Osindo. Maybe a hundred of them, all armed. Don't know what they're walking into by the looks of it. It's a girl leading them, not much left of her face to tell..."

Enangnon smiled.

"She knows exactly where she's going."

*

The path into the Xwedo's village was open and lined with torches.

Her young warriors had their daggers in hand at every shadow protruding from the metal contraptions littering the ground around them.

The warriors' numbers had been swelled by some strays and villagers who'd fled.

What they saw in Sènkpon's branches was their own, but cast the same spell on all. Or perhaps broke it.

The shadows grew into a large bonfire.

There he was, the boy sitting on the metal chair. Seeing him seated in the hulking throne, he appeared smaller than a child. The look in his eye unsure and fleeting, surrounded by a circle of warriors, arms at rest, their features as twisted as her own now.

Enangnon rose as she took a step towards him, unconsciously palming her knife. Her small band wouldn't stand a chance.

"There is no forgiveness for what I've done to you," he said before she could react. "And I ask for none. My people will not stop you. You may still kill me if you wish, but hear me out first."

She recognised the giant screen from her visions. The movie reel bouncing between satellites until the sun exploded, for the dried eyes of a lost host now found.

"We need each other more than we hate each other," she said. "And that's more than enough. But we can't use violence. They have to come willingly. Anything less than that and..."

"...And it will only repeat itself..." Enangnon finished. "Odd ways of waging war. But it just might work."

*

Hundreds of arrows poured from the branches.

"Stop moving!"

Dozens of shadows dropped from the trees.

"The Xwedo!"

"What?!"

"Kill them!"

The forest slithered with bowstrings drawing.

Well, that was short-lived, she thought.

NO!

She dropped her knife. They all dropped something. And froze, their bodies numbed by the tremor.

The villagers dropped to their knees.

"The Voice of the Tree."

"Thought it might be," Agbodji said.

"You've spoken to him too?"

"Who?" she asked. "Sènankpon?"

A gasp.

"What? Yes, we have. And you really shouldn't be kneeling."

"Kneeling? Really?"

Sènankpon's branches shrugged.

"Never asked them to. I must just be that kind of tree."

She turned to the nearest man. He looked familiarly foreign—they had all split into different tribes, and in so little time, they weren't who they used to know anymore.

"How many of you are there?"

"I don't know, but it doesn't matter—there's more of us than villagers and Mothers left. We have all the food. They are practically starving."

Agbodji looked around. There were several hundred of them here. Armed, but aimless. They would shoot where directed, kill who they were told.

Enagnon spit on the ground, took one of the bows from the woman standing nearest to him, and snapped it on his knee.

"Then you won't need these."

The first salvo of arrows wounded two of her band.

The second killed one, and then the arrows stopped. People started streaming out of the huts. Or rather, at a trickle and a relieved one too.

Their hands weren't raised, but their downcast eyes spoke the same. Their emaciated figures too.

"Please." They would ask. "Please. They cry all day and whisper nightmares all night. We can't take it anymore. Please make them stop..."

*

"Agbodji! Come quick." A young boy she didn't recognise yelled, barging into her hut. "You won't believe this..."

Leadership. That word is a lie. You're at everyone's beck and call, everybody's problems are your own, none of yours are anybody's but yourself, and occasionally they listen to you.

Enagnon laughed, rising from the corner of the hut, his head brushing the ceiling.

"I got this one," he said, following the young boy. "I told you you didn't want this."

In the few months since taking over the village, they had never mentioned the past. She'd swear they were friends, but history takes another to mend. First would come a new reality. Check. Then a common struggle. Work in progress. And only then forgiveness.

He was wrong, though. Selfish as it was, she did want this. Hopefully for the right reasons.

Enagnon came rushing back in.

"Yeah. You're gonna want to see this yourself."

*

Agbodji realised she was wrong.

Looking down all the way to the coast, at the few hundred huts that used to be numbered in the thousands, reaching almost to the ring of hills she stood on.

They'd never even known those hills were there, so narrowly focused the Mothers were on the tiny ecosystem they'd created. The little they could control.

She understood then how control stifled creation, how to lose yourself was to find yourself, pieced together into a new tapestry.

When Enagnon barged back out the hut, she'd followed, and didn't believe it, not even after seeing it.

The newcomers. Hundreds of them. Some deformed, some not. Some glowing faintly in the dark, some who spoke through songs, but couldn't dance to save their lives.

They were not alone. They never were.

The water buffalo pulling their carts reclaimed vast areas of swamplands, spreading seeds through their droppings, drawing new species in, bringing even more people. The leftover radiation slowly drowned out, fewer children born with deformities. New forms of medicine. And that was just the beginning.

Why they still called it a village, she had no idea. She had put someone in charge of inventory, but it was a lot to keep up with. But that was their problem.

The old grove sat somewhere halfway along the coast. A semicircle of clean waters and islets, liana bridges and treehouses.

Enagnon lived there, Dreaming. Painting his visions of new projects for their world. She couldn't see the children, but they'd be there. Sitting. Listening to the

trees tell tales of olden days and fairy tales and hidden monsters, tickling them to giggles, screams and encores.

She watched him sometimes.

"If I see it, it's real. If I can paint it, I can make it," he would say, brushstroke after brushstroke.

The roads leading away from the village circled around the hills and stretched behind her, sprinkled with cart wagons heading to and fro. North towards other villages and handcrafted goods and foods. East toward the wastelands and technology.

Five years.

Barely a flash.

But a firework all the same.

She'd been absolutely wrong.

Common struggle and forgiveness weren't two separate things at all.

They were one and the same.

*

Agbodji sat by Sèrankpon, her toes in the clear waters. A small drone buzzed and chirped almost bird-like overhead, pruning the mangrove trees, clearing away broken branches and rotting leaves.

Dozens more streaked silver lightning along the coast, and the clusters of small islands, with their scent of grilled fish and meats, wafting spices from spinning skewers.

"Voted you out, huh?"

"They did!" She said ricocheting a pebble across the surface. "Little bastards could barely crawl when we ... and now..."

She'd said the same thing all day. That this was the way. That it was the Youth Council, not Agbodji's Council. But...

"...And now you feel old and useless?"

"I set myself up for that, didn't I?"

Grey clouds streamed in from the horizon, trailing thin strips of virga, blowing salty gusts into the bay. On the islands nearest the water, lights in the huts went on behind drawn curtains. The flat black Sun-catchers covered against the storm under thick layers of transparent leaves. The islands turned into shifting constellations, blinking against the dark waters as the storm gathered fury.

"Imagine. We could have had all of this before."

"You had," Sèrankpon said softly. "That's how you have it now. None of this is new."

She trembled as the wind blew under her sleeves, a bone-deep chill that froze her spine solid.

"And we destroyed everything despite it."

"Yes."

"And we'll do it again."

"Yes."

"Is there anything we can do to stop it?"

Sènkpon paused. He too enjoyed the growing gusts, the metal bees tickling his branches, the dried tears of the other trees turned to song.

"Not if you try. Not if you don't. Trying only makes it worse. Everything dies. But that doesn't mean it ends."

She let a thinly leaved branch drink the tear from her eye.

"I don't want to be there when it ends. I want to live in this moment forever."

"And now you can. They used to say: 'The dead don't die in Africa.' That's what this place was called once. The fragments that remain. I don't know if it was true then. Maybe it was an answer to a call from the future. Maybe our today. And you can live to tell the tale."

Agbodji breathed in deeply.

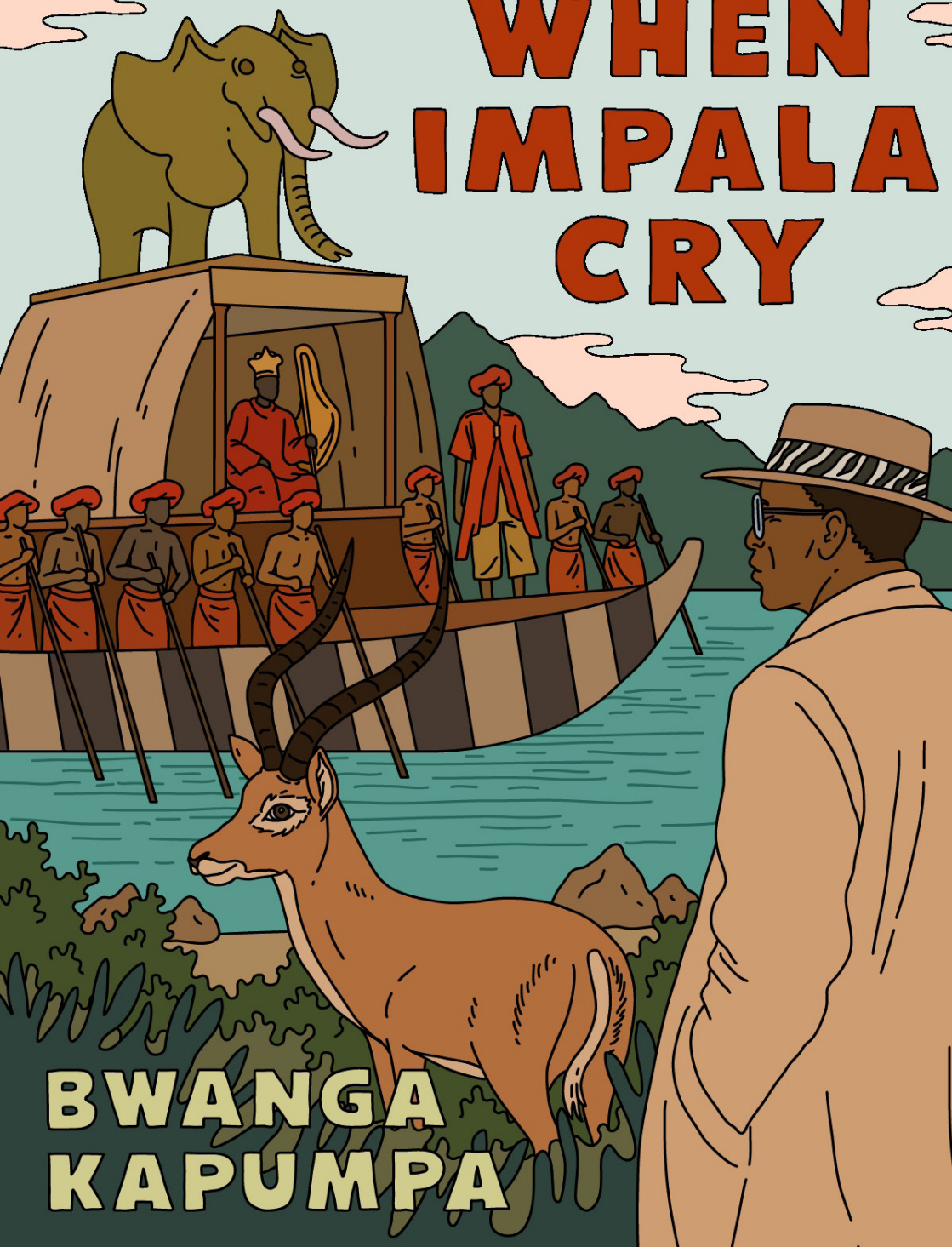
"There will be lightning tonight, and Hebyoussou always answers those who ask."

She nodded, sitting silently as the cloud's rumble turned roar.

She slipped into the water, her feet meeting with Sènkpon's roots, the tiny barnacles along the wood scratching her toes.

She closed her eyes as the first bolts seared the distance, striking the water, each blast growing closer, answering the call she hadn't known she'd made. The after-glow growing brighter against her eyelids, letting herself drown, knowing that come morning, as her lungs burst under the pressure, like the mangrove in the realm she'd dreamt: she would be one with everything.

WHEN IMPALA CRY



BWANGA
KAPUMPA

When Impala Cry

BY BWANGA KAPUMPA

“Out of the ashes rises the phoenix”—Ancient Egyptian legend

PROLOGUE

Excerpt from *“The Grass is Greener on the Barotse Side”* by Jarell Thompson for Unlearn Magazine.

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When the charcoal crisis of 2X25 occurred, you would have been hard-pressed to find someone who predicted that Barotseland, let alone Zambia, would emerge from the smouldering embers of deforestation to become a contender for Most Desirable Place to Live in the World.

To the few in the global north who had even heard of it, Zambia was nothing more than a backwater destination where you could take scenic holidays and safaris; a third world economy that perpetually suckled on the teat of charitable organisations. One United States president had even referred to similar

nations as “shithole countries”. Brought to the brink of failed statehood after countless sociopolitical faux pas by their leaders, the citizens of Zambia chose to take a critical look at why the economy had turned dire and their quality of life was squalid. Most of this work was led by the people of Barotseland, formerly Zambia’s Western Province. Their hard work and research initiated much of the climate-smart technologies and agriculture the rest of the world uses today, and led to deeper, more conscious living.

Today, with its organic architecture, schools of thought and academic institutions that have scholars from around the world intrigued, Barotseland has become a prime destination for exchange programs and education. It is the subject of study for many sociologists and could potentially become the Utopia humans have dreamed of for centuries. But to understand how this became possible, we need to go back roughly a century.

When the Kenambian government announced plans for a finance bill that would introduce new taxes and adjust existing ones, the people of Kenambia revolted, fearing that the cost of living would skyrocket. This action inspired the youth of Nigeria to protest the similar conditions they were facing, calling for an end to bad governance. Scores of young people, unwaged and employed alike, took to the streets to show their leaders that they had had enough. Stones were thrown, lives were lost, and property was set on fire. This flame quickly spread to other parts of the continent, and the African revolution was ignited. Uprisings sprouted like unplanned settlements, some avalanching into formidable movements while others were quelled by ruthless dictators with no regard for human life.

Witnessing these scenes across social media channels and online news reports, Zambians were also moved to act. What began as peaceful protests against long hours of loadshedding and an ailing economy quickly escalated into bloodshed in a fight for decent living conditions. Corrupt leaders were ousted. Key government officials fled the country. Only a handful of leaders the people deemed fit to steer the nation were left to form a coalition body. This authority decided to effectively close the country and rethink how it did business with the rest of the world. It also gave Zambians the opportunity to reconsider what it *meant* to be Zambian.

These discussions on the philosophy of nationhood and co-existence with the natural environment were spearheaded by the people of Barotseland. They continuously revised their cultural values to enhance quality of life for their people, focusing on indigenous knowledge to resolve issues. A “template” for

consulting oral histories and archives was established by the BaLozi of Barotseland, and spread across the ten provinces of Zambia. These schools of thought mostly did away with colonial approaches to governance, which had not worked for the people since the country's so-called independence.

It took many decades, but evidence of the positive impact of returning to their cultural values can be seen in many facets of Zambian society. From textiles to technology, media to medicine, politics to pop culture—Barotseland and Zambia overhauled all aspects of their national identity. The country and its people are thriving by any measurable metrics.

Thompson reported from Barotseland and other parts of Zambia. He spoke with historians, political scientists, diplomats and local people.



The Kuomboka Ceremony of the BaLozi has always been a spectacle to witness. Like any event where people gather in droves for debauchery and merry-making, it has its own legends and bizarre stories. Nobody, however, could have foreseen a murder being committed by an impala this year.

The world's climate had long since shifted its mood. At dawn, the sky could weep like an inconsolable mourner, show the coldest temperament in the afternoon, and then be hot and bothered at night. While the West and Middle East employed weather machines to manipulate the elements, the people of Barotseland in Zambia had turned to the old gods and their ancestors' ancient arts, literally to weather the storm. This allowed them to plan and host the most spectacular Kuomboka Ceremony in over half a century.

For decades, the plains of what was once known as Western Province would flood when the rains came, prompting their Litunga, or king, to move from his Lealui compound to his Limulunga home in the highlands. These floods had worsened over the years, and the traditional ceremony of the proud Lozi people had had to be put on hold indefinitely. The weather conditions were exacerbated by the charcoal crisis of 2X25, when large swathes of forests were cut down to meet the demand for charcoal after the rationing of electricity supply became more stringent in Zambia. The Lozi were forced to rethink their way of life. When Western science and modern technology had failed them, the people turned to traditional sciences: what layfolk and staunch Christians labelled "witchcraft".

Skilled rain dancers and sitondo beat drums until their palms were calloused. Ng'akas made offerings to ancestors for what seemed like an eternity before the cli-

mate in Barotseland began to reach a sense of normalcy. This success led the people to reconsider what other elements of indigenous knowledge they could tap into for their land to prosper. Soon the findings and inventions of the Lozi spread to other corners of the country and several nations within the region.

Research and development for the enchanted kaliloze night guns was funded for military use. High-level ng'aka taught people to teleport across long distances. Climate-smart methods of farming using endemic seeds and wild fruits were becoming widespread. Part of the Barotse's return to the Old Ways was to live in harmony with the beasts, and communicate with them through the sitondo—those with the gift of controlling wild animals. There was now a long-standing mutual respect between animals and humans on the plains of Barotseland.

The return to the ways of the soil soon made Barotseland a hub of science and economics. The province became a lucrative tourist attraction, with many nationalities and tribes visiting. This made the fateful ceremony the most well-attended Kuomboka in the history of Zambia.



Chitimwaiche was next in line for the throne of the Bemba Kingdom. Unfortunately, he cared more about his drink than he did for his soon-to-be subjects. His ailing father, Chitimukulu, still held out high hopes for him. So when the invitation to attend the most magnificent Kuomboka Ceremony since its inception came from Barotseland, he went against the wishes of all his advisors, and sent Chitimwaiche and a handful of delegates to represent him. He thought that perhaps Chiti would be inspired by the BaLozi Kingdom and its achievements. That maybe the exposure to a more advanced culture would spark something in his son's mind.

Upon his arrival in their kingdom, the young man drank more than his fill of the Lozi's ngai and baobab fruit craft beer. He barely paid attention during the royal tour that he and his delegation were taken on the day before the ceremony. Instead, he made crude jokes as they passed above the beautiful city of Mongu in a solar cable car, even urinating through the window at one point.

"This is how we do our rain dance back home!" he slurred, much to the displeasure of his guide and the embarrassment of his father's advisors.

Chitimwaiche was not impressed by the intentional lack of concrete, or the use of clay, inspired by traditional village architecture, to construct tall buildings in Barotse's metropolis, Mongu. He hardly listened when the royal chaperon waxed poetic about how fish scales were used to create solar panels that harnessed the power of the sun and electrified whole towns. His interest might have been piqued when

the ng'akas showed his delegation how they could teleport over long distances, had he not been asleep standing up—a skill not even the most powerful sorcerers had.

On the day of the ceremony, Chitimwaiche missed the morning activities because he had not slept during the night. He had spent the previous evening sampling yet more of the craft and traditional beers that Barotseland had to offer. That afternoon, he became even more of a nuisance, his lack of sleep causing his drunkenness to border on delirium. He groped female dancers, nearly got into fights with the king's royal paddlers, and was not allowed onto the Nalikwanda—the regal barge that the Litunga and his delegation travelled on to reach the highlands. He had to walk (or stagger, rather) to the festival's destination. He gave his security detail, responsible for protecting him, an exceedingly difficult time as he moved through the large crowd.

When the Nalikwanda landed at the Limulunga palace, and the Litunga and his entourage disembarked, Chitimwaiche was there waiting for them. There, as in most parts of Barotseland, many grazers like zebra and wildebeest roamed freely.

The cameras snapped, and the Litunga and his family posed in a manner befitting majesty. Chitimwaiche stumbled through the people and crashed to the front of the crowd to try and take a place in the royal photographs. Seeing his drunkenness, an imperial guard attempted to stop him from getting close to the family, but King Lewanika saw this, and gave his assent for Chiti to come forward. The drunk prince struck poses with inverted peace signs high in the air, getting uncomfortably close to the Litunga. He was asked to leave, but when he was only a few steps away, he suddenly turned back and leapt in front of the camera, intending to photobomb the portrait of the King and his entourage. But as soon as Chiti's feet touched down, he was pierced deep in the soft of his midsection by two impala horns. No one had seen the antelope charging forward.

The Litunga's guard formed a human shield around the king and swiftly ushered him and his family away, as Chitimwaiche uttered guttural screams. Most of the crowd fled; the few who remained pointed their camera devices at the scene to take photos and record videos. The bucking impala withdrew its horns, looked around, frightened, and then tried to escape. One of the Litunga's guards fired his kaliloze at it, and it thudded onto the ground with the grace of a sand-filled sack, stunned but still alive. It was swiftly captured and then jailed to await trial.



Though animals were rarely caged in Barotseland, Impala 180, as the offending antelope came to be known, was incarcerated and questioned at Mongu Central Police station. Human-animal conflict was said to be a thing of the past, with the

sitondo using mystic arts to exchange thoughts with the beasts, and this had allowed agreements to be made on how to segment the land and care for the shared environment. This meant that animals were subject to the laws of humans, and humans were subject to the laws of nature, depending on whose territory they were in. So Impala 180 was to be tried by the provisions of human legislature for the crime of murdering Chitimwaiche.

Sitondo interpreters were brought in to question the impala, but he did not respond. While sitondo and animals could communicate telepathically, one had to willingly offer up their thoughts for the “conversation” to happen. Impala 180 remained silent. He was a ten-year-old male, but fully mature for the impala species. This meant the full force of the law would come down on him for the heinous crime of killing the son of the Bemba king. This behaviour, however, was very uncharacteristic of an impala, especially the ones that had chosen to live among humans. They had always been timid herbivores, and never attacked any other species unless their young were threatened or their private territory was encroached on.

The incident at the ceremony immediately caused tension between BaLozi and Bemba tribes. Granted, he was drunk and playing the buffoon, but the Bemba king’s son was still an invited guest and killed while in the care of the Lozi. The Bemba Kingdom needed answers, and was calling for the heads of the impala and its entire bloodline. But justice would not be easy to deliver.

After lengthy negotiations, Impala 180 agreed to reveal the motives for his crime on condition he could have impala peers present in court. On the day he was due to go on public trial, he was bitten by a black mamba that had slithered into his cell, and died within minutes. It was widely believed that Impala 180 was assassinated to ensure his silence.

The political backlash and tension were immense. The Bemba accused the Lozi of using their sitondo to send animal assassins as an act of aggression. The sovereign nation of Zambia had never experienced any war in its entire existence, but the Bemba king was so aggrieved, there were murmurs of its possibility. The Lozi asked for a month to carry out a thorough investigation and make amends. They were given a week.

That was when *He* was brought in.



The ng’aka detective, Mubita Nyambe, was planning to retire in a month, although he had not informed anyone about this, not even his personal assistant. The need for high-level witchfinders had declined in recent years, and Nyambe had decided it was time to close his small private investigation operation. Combining

his spiritual practice with contemporary police knowledge had once made him a unique gem, but the landscape had changed. Very few people came to the ng'aka to find their abducted child or divine who had cursed their relative anymore. Even though people had employed the Old Ways and were now steeped in traditional knowledge, witches had become a rarity because there were almost no poor people in Barotseland. Naturally, most of the working ng'akas had gone into more profitable government programmes to teach their arts. Private practices like those of the ng'aka detective's were unregulated, and Christian scepticism made them even less sought out.

Mubita Nyambe had taken to daydreaming about what he would do after he retired. Start a wildebeest ranch? Perhaps fish farming. A microbrewery for mabuyu craft beer seemed like a potentially lucrative idea. But all his prospective ventures would cost money. The ng'aka had very little in the way of savings, and he would also need to pay his assistant a gratuity. So when the request for his investigative services came from the Barotse Royal Establishment, he knew he had to take the case, regardless of what it involved. His remuneration would surely be substantial.

He was sitting in his office, watching a government mouthpiece talking online about a new developmental project. The newsclip projected from the SmartGlasses he wore, overlaying a translucent scene onto the inside of his office door. The report was about a first-of-its-kind satellite facility to begin construction in a matter of days.

"We believe that the Naleli Satellite will help us make a significant leap into the future," the spokesperson said in Lozi. "While we have made many advances in climate-smart practices by tapping into our indigenous knowledge, we need to do more on the technological front. Increased agricultural activities have led to very low unemployment levels. We have healthier, more organic food, and are exporting more surplus than ever before, but there is still room for improvement and the Naleli Satellite can assist us with that. By tracking and analysing weather conditions in various locations at unprecedented speeds, this satellite will enable us to prepare for adverse eventualities and help us to reach an ecological balance our forefathers would be proud of.

"We also recognise the environmental impact of this work, and as always, our efforts are dedicated to the conservation of our natural environment. That's why every baobab tree that will be uprooted in the mostly barren Old Liuwa Plains shall be replanted in another, more fertile location. There are twenty-three trees in total, each over three hundred years old," the man said. "And on a smaller scale, we have also discovered large amounts of a rare species of psychoactive mushroom known as *Psilocybe Semilanceata* or 'liberty cap' in the area. It is usually found in more temperate climates, but has also been known to grow in parts of Africa under the right conditions. This is an exciting discovery for our mycologists. Because of

the mushroom's capabilities in improving neuroplasticity, samples will be collected and studied for use in treatments for depression and addiction disorders. Though these baobab trees and mushroom species are guardians of the green and contain centuries of knowledge, they will have to be moved to make way for advancements in climate-smart science—"

A rap at the door. The detective lowered his augmented-reality glasses, and the video before him cut out along with the sound from his mini earpiece. His personal assistant Liseli walked in with a grim-faced man, who was draped in flowing, expensive-looking fabric.

"Boss, Nambulo Lindunda from the BRE is here to see you," she said.

"Liseli, please don't call me 'boss'. Especially when we have company," Nyambe said as he stood up.

"Sorry, boss," Liseli replied before leaving the two men in the office.

The detective shook his head. "Please take a seat, Mr Lindunda," he said, gesturing to the chair in front of the old Zambian teak desk he sat behind. "Let's get right into it, shall we?"

The man gathered his long robe and sat down.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me," he said. "As I mentioned in my email, we urgently require your services, and I come bearing a request from the King himself."

Nyambe grunted in acknowledgement.

"You no doubt have heard about the unfortunate incident with Chitimwaiche, the son of Chitimukulu, King of the Bemba people?"

The ng'aka detective nodded.

"The Bemba King is aggrieved, to say the least, and our own Litunga would be deeply relieved if this fiasco went away promptly. We need to find out *why* the animal killed the young prince, and who was behind the attack."

"Isn't the Royal Police Service already on the case? Why have you come to me?" asked Nyambe.

"We believe that you have certain *skills* that would be useful in this situation. And yes, the Royal Police are carrying out an investigation, but they are bound by bureaucratic procedures and much red-ochre tape. The Bemba need answers, and have allowed us only seven days to solve this dilemma—or risk starting Zambia's first civil war."

"War?" asked Detective Nyambe.

"Yes. The Bemba King believes that this was an act of provocation and is ready to avenge the death of his heir a thousandfold," said Nambulo. "Even though I think that whoever killed the boy may have done the Bemba people a favour," he muttered.

"Careful, sir. With statements like that, I might consider you a suspect."

"Does that mean you will take the job?" Nambulo asked.

"Do I have a choice?"

"Of course you do. But if you refuse, you will be considered a treasonous traitor, and severe action will be taken. However, we would still like to know that you are co-operating of your own free will."

"Hm," the ng'aka grunted. "And do you have any suspects?"

"Naturally," Nambulo said. "We think the sitondo could have orchestrated this—they can communicate with animals, after all—and based on what we know about you, we are confident you would be a match for them."

"What reason would the sitondo have for killing the Bemba prince?"

"That's what we are paying you to find out," Nambulo retorted. He stood up to leave. "Now, if you don't have any more questions, I have a crisis to try and avert."

"I do have one more question, if you don't mind," said Nyambe. "What fabric are you wearing? It looks incredibly comfortable."

"This is made from a premium hemp grown right here in Barotseland. The design, however, is my own. Anything else?"

"Yes, I'll need fifty per cent of my fee upfront," the detective said. "Please do the needful through my assistant."

"You will be paid handsomely; money is no object. I will arrange for your fee to be credited to your account. But if you solve this case in good time, the Crown is prepared to pay you a sum large enough for you to live a relatively comfortable life."

"That's what I'm counting on," Nyambe said.

Nambulo's arm emerged from his deep sleeve, and he gave the ng'aka a firm handshake before leaving the office.

The case of Chitimwaiche was something that Detective Nyambe had taken an interest in even before the BRE had employed him. On nights when he was bored and the cane spirit failed to help him sleep, he visited the Mongu Central Police forensics lab. He liked to offer his professional opinion, and sometimes used his supernatural abilities to assist the police in solving cases. This was how he came to know Sepo, the lead forensic scientist at the lab.

Sepo had given the ng'aka access to the two cadavers in exchange for manhood enlargement herbs. "They're not for me," Sepo had insisted. "I just want to study them."

Nyambe had already closely inspected Chitimwaiche's body, and the toxicology report had brought back nothing useful. It indicated that the victim had consumed large amounts of alcohol, which several eyewitnesses had already corroborated. There was no doubt that he was killed by sharp-force trauma. However, while the impala was killed by a black mamba's snake venom, the toxicology report showed that it had partly digested psychoactive mushrooms in its stomach, and high traces of psilocybin in its blood.

“We’re still running tests, but preliminary results indicate that this impala had been eating magic mushrooms. That could have been the cause of its unusual behavior,” Sepo had said. “But it’s very strange, because animals generally know instinctively to avoid toxic or psychoactive plants.”

The same thought remained with the detective long after he had left the forensics lab that night.

Now he put his SmartGlasses back on, and ran internet searches on the potential effects of psilocybin as he made himself a strong cocktail.

Humans have waged war on nature for centuries. And although most of the world had begun to see the error of its ways, the environment was yet to be convinced by humanity’s efforts. It occasionally fought back, and the sitondo had their work cut out for them.

A sitondo was believed to possess the ability to control both lightning and rain. In the old days, they could even ward off an undesired storm, but that was in an era when there was more of an understanding between humans and nature. More of a balance. Now, the ng’aka wa pula—literally translated as “a doctor of rain”—mainly acts as a mediator between the weather and his community. This ability was passed down from one generation to another, and one family in particular had honed this power into a lucrative enterprise.

Due to the adverse effects of climate change, the Lozi sitondo and their contemporaries in other Zambian cultures were employed by the government to mitigate adverse weather conditions. In Barotseland, the Mungoni family were the Sitondo Prime, and had grown wealthy because of their position. Whispers in the shadows also claimed that owing to their family totem and closeness to nature, the Mungonis had the ability to assume the shape of wild animals. The loudest whispers said they might be responsible for the death of Chitimwaiche.

Detective Mubita Nyambe paid a house call to Muyangwa Mungoni, the patriarch of the family and one of the wealthiest men in the country. The detective had also run a search through online records of mycological species, which showed that there were no psychotropic mushrooms at Limulunga where the Kuomboka festivities had abruptly concluded. Psychoactive mushrooms were sometimes used in some traditional ceremonies and medicines, and Nyambe was of the theory that perhaps the mushrooms in the impala’s stomach were from some sitondo ritual. But first the ng’aka intended to find out why the Mungonis might have been behind the murder of the Bemba prince.



The Mungoni mansion was a marvel of Zambian architecture. Its lawns were immaculate, never thirsting for water, because the sitondo family could create rain nearly all year round. The two-storey building was made from a special clay, something the ng'aka had learned about in primary school. He tried to recall its name as he looked up at the cloudy sky. He then bent down, pretending to wipe his shoes, and placed a very small enchanted object at the entrance to the house.

The mansion's interior could have passed for a museum or art gallery, with its many wooden artefacts and works of Zambian excellence on display. Rare paintings by Henry Tayali and lost sculptures by Flinto Chandia lined the labyrinthian halls. The butler led the ng'aka detective to the office, where they found one of his many grandchildren telling Mungoni about what he had learned at school.

"And did you know, kuku, that Liuwa National Park was once home to the second largest wildebeest migration in the whole world?" the child exclaimed as he opened his arms wide.

"Is that so?" Muyangwa replied, although his eyes were on the detective as he walked in.

"Yes! And now they're going to launch the new Naleli Satellite from there to help with climate change."

The old man laughed and asked his grandson to excuse him and the visitor. "Lubinda, let me talk to our guest," he said. "Go with Mwenda and find some paper to draw me what the wildebeest migration used to look like." The young boy greeted the detective and ran out of the room ahead of the butler.

"I like that they are teaching them about the climate and conservation very early in their education these days," Muyangwa said to the detective. "How can I help you, mister...?"

"Detective Mubita Nyambe. I'm a private investigator, Mr Mungoni."

"A long time ago, people believed that on cloudy days or during a storm, it wasn't wise to refer to a rainmaker by his proper name. To do so would disperse the clouds and dry up the rain," Mungoni said. "Please refer to me as Baba Sitondo."

"I'll remember that," replied the ng'aka. "Let me get right to it."

"Before you do..." the sitondo said. His eyes rolled back so that Nyambe could only see their whites. He then raised his arm to the ceiling, and a clap of thunder reverberated outside the house, just before a flash of lightning illuminated the grey day. The ng'aka did not flinch.

The awkward silence between the two men was broken by a distant thudding in the corridor that was drawing closer. A well-groomed hyena burst in through the large wooden door of the office with a small, smoking object in its mouth. Its master patted its head, then took the object and showed it to the ng'aka.

"A truth charm," said Mungoni. "I haven't seen one of these in decades. What do you need with this, detective? Like I told the Royal Police, I have nothing to hide."

“Then why did you destroy it?” Nyambe asked.

“Just a precaution. My pet here saw something suspicious by our door and alerted me. Who knows what your intentions are?”

“Your hyena alerted you? So you *can* control animals?” asked the detective.

“Not all animals. My father, and his father before him, was known as ng’aka wa sitongwani, a doctor of hyenas. It is our family totem. Other sitondo clans control lions and crocodiles.”

“And impala?” asked the ng’aka.

“What are you getting at, Nyambe?” the sitondo asked. His hyena growled.

“My employers suspect that you and your fraternity of sitondo sent Impala 180 to kill the son of the Bemba King at the Kuomboka.”

“That’s absurd! Why on earth would we risk a war with the Bemba?” Mungoni retorted.

“That’s what I would like you to tell me, rain doctor.”

“You continue to insult me. The concern of a doctor is the welfare of individuals. Rain is a matter that is vital to the whole kingdom. The whole country. I am a *rain-maker!*” said the sitondo. “Why then would I need to send a lowly impala to kill the heir to one of Zambia’s largest tribes?”

“To sacrifice him for more power?” replied Nyambe. “The higher the social status of the human sacrifice, the more power one gains. The psychotropic mushrooms in the animal’s stomach indicate that it could have been used as part of a ritual.”

“Sacrifices for power are petty games for you witchdoctors and your witches,” Mungoni said sardonically. “Look around you. Do I look like I need more power?”

The ng’aka was silent.

“Now, I think you have worn out your welcome. Please leave—,” Mungoni tossed the partially charred charm into the ng’aka’s hands, “—before I make you”. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

“Thank you for your time. I’ll see myself out,” said Nyambe as he turned and walked out of the room.



On the crowded solar cable car, he scrolled through his newsfeed. Sliding his finger over his palm, his holographic display device showed muted videos of new organic skincare products, Chitimukulu’s outrage at his son’s death, and a report by the Human Rights Group demanding justice for Impala 180’s actions. Detective Nyambe had his next lead.

The HRG or Human Rights Group, as its eponymous name suggests, started out as a collective to defend and uphold human rights. But as Zambia moved towards

better societal values and standards, human rights injustices drastically declined. The wellspring of donor funding gradually dried up, but the HRG still needed money to sustain itself. It found a new adversary, turning its attention towards animals. The Group claimed that with increased government and non-profit conservation efforts, humans had forgotten their role as rulers of this earth. They charged that it was a tragedy that vast swathes of land were dedicated to animal habitats when they could be used to build better housing for human beings. Trying to repopulate or rewild animals that had once thrived in certain areas was foolish when the money spent on those ventures could be used to fund research to cure human disease and more.

The Group engaged in peaceful protests, but over the years, there were rumours that they sometimes resorted to violent guerilla tactics to sway policy on animal welfare. Small homemade explosives were planted at the offices of decision-makers, and many times the very humans that the HRG claimed to be concerned for were injured and maimed in attempts to discourage conservation. Sympathisers and bigots continued to fund this cause, but there was no direct evidence to link the HRG to the attacks. It operated from the proverbial shadows.

After a few phone calls and strongarm tactics, Detective Nyambe found out that the reclusive leader of the HRG was overseeing the production of fertiliser bombs at a decommissioned plant on the outskirts of Mongu that evening. The detective decided to drop by for a chat.

With the advent of better organic farming methods, fertiliser was no longer used in most parts of the country, and numerous manufacturing plants had been decommissioned. This made the old Mongu Agrow factory an ideal location for an extremist group wanting to plan their next attack. The large building housed obsolete machinery that had gathered sheets of dust. The detective climbed in through a window in a secluded part of the factory, creeping between mechanical monoliths. He followed the sound of echoing voices that got louder as he approached. Once he got close enough, he stopped behind a rusty storage container to observe what the speakers were doing.

Two people appeared to be mixing chemicals in old drums, and the strong smell of ammonia floated through the poorly ventilated room. A third person seemed to be overseeing the operation. Although they all wore gas masks, it was clear that the leader was a woman.

"Hurry up, hurry up!" she said to the men in a muffled voice. "We still have another batch to mix."

The fumes were becoming unbearable. Nyambe hurriedly grabbed his handkerchief from his back pocket and bunched it up to cover his nose and mouth. But he had already inhaled a little too much of the bad air, and his cough echoed throughout the building.

The men froze and locked eyes. One of them nodded to their leader, and she bolted towards the nearest exit. The two henchmen each pulled out a gun from their waistbands and fanned out to look for the source of the noise. Detective Nyambe needed to act quickly. He revealed himself, stepping out from behind the container, holding one hand up to show that he was unarmed and keeping the handkerchief over his nose and mouth with the other.

"I just want to talk. I don't mean you any harm," he said in a nasal voice.

The bigger of the two men tipped over a steel drum of chemicals and ignited it with a lighter. The smaller man sent a flurry of bullets at the detective. Nyambe retreated snake-like to his hiding spot, pulled out his kaliloze, and returned fire. He still intended to retire on his own terms.

The kaliloze's blast hit the small man in the shoulder, and he folded to the ground. A puddle of the lit chemical drenched the seat and leg of his pants, igniting his clothes. He screamed as he rolled around trying to extinguish the fire. The big man charged at Nyambe, slamming his back onto the hard floor. He head-butted the detective and then fired, missing his skull by inches. The pistol's report rang painfully inside Nyambe's ears, and he struggled to get the big thug off him. He kned the man in his groin, and fired his kaliloze at the brute's stomach. The man rolled off, yelling in anguish. Nyambe then staggered towards the exit through which the leader had escaped, and flung its metal door open. He spotted the woman in the driver's seat of a car, struggling to start it. Nyambe was relieved to see she drove an old internal combustion engine; she would have been long gone if she had an electric car.

The ng'aka had seconds to act. He reached inside his pocket and pulled out a likeness—a small, cursed figure of a masked man. He unscrewed its head and threw it in the direction of the car. The spirit of the familiar whose essence the ng'aka employed to do his bidding floated out of the worn figurine.

"Stop her!" he commanded.

The familiar reached the lady in an instant. She shrieked in horror as the aberration showed her its true face, something no ordinary person should ever witness. The ng'aka limped towards the car. It was definitely about time to retire. He picked up the wooden figure and called the spirit back into it. The woman trembled in frantic prayer when he opened her car door.

"Please! Don't kill me!" she said, her voice muffled by the gas mask.

"I don't want to kill you. I just want to ask you a few questions."

The flames inside the building licked several surfaces and found more fuel for the growing inferno. The fire's flickering threw the ng'aka's shadow across the woman's face, heightening her terror. This and the encounter with the spirit made her a willing informant.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know! Just don't trap me in that—that—thing of yours!"

"What were you planning to do with those explosives you were cooking in there?" asked the detective.

"We-we were planning on hitting the small African Parks de-depot, where they are keeping some impala to restock the Kafue National Park po-population," she stammered. "There weren't going to be any human casualties!"

"You're not known for your subtlety, so I doubt that. Why do you want to attack the depot? Do you intend to use the impala for more murders? Like with Chitim-waiche?"

"That wasn't us!"

"Don't lie to me!" Nyambe said.

"I swear upon my children! We want justice for what that stupid animal did! Human rights before animal rights!"

The ng'aka grabbed the woman by the scruff of her shirt and tore off her gas mask. She looked older than he had assumed. The crow's feet on the sides of her face creased as she recoiled from him.

"I'll do worse than confine you to my likishi doll!" he barked in her face. "Tell me how you got Impala 180 to kill! You fed the animal psychotropic mushrooms, didn't you?"

"I'm begging you, don't hurt me! We didn't do it! We *have* tried to control animals before, to make them m-more aggressive through training and certain compounds... But those were contained experiments, and we didn't succeed. You can't control these beasts! Muh-maybe someone took our research and is trying to frame us! Please let me go, the Bemba boy's murder wasn't our doing! Human rights before animal rights! Human rights before animal rights!" she sobbed.

Detective Nyambe let her go. He double-tapped his mini earpiece with his index finger. "Call Sepo, Forensics Lab", he commanded.

"My Ng'aka supreme!" a voice inside the earpiece said after a couple of rings.

"Hi, Sepo, I need a favour," the detective said.

"Don't you always?" replied Sepo.

"I need you to run more toxicology tests on Impala 180," Nyambe said. "Let me know if you find anything that could possibly increase susceptibility to hypnosis or even mind control."

"Mind-controlled impalas? Sounds like you've been watching too much sci-fi, doc".

"Just do it. I have good reason to believe that the HRG was testing something on animals. Let me know as soon as you find anything."

"Never a dull moment, huh? I'll be in touch!" Sepo exclaimed, and then cut the line



Back at his office the next afternoon, Detective Nyambe began thinking about which friends he would visit once he retired. But he had either fallen out with the few he once kept, or they had died over the years. He entertained the thought of making new ones. Perhaps he and his new comrades could go fishing, maybe drink traditional beer and meet up to watch football, or whatever activities friends got up to these days. But first he would need to solve this wretched case.

He put on his SmartGlasses and requested the news. The first item was about the previous day's arrest of the leader of the extremist Human Rights Group.

"Edith Nalukui, who has led the Group since its inception, has confessed to having organised numerous attacks against animal rights activists and conservancies, which she had previously repeatedly denied. She was found and arrested at the scene of a burning decommissioned Mongu Agrow plant after an anonymous tip to the police. She is suspected of having caused the fire. Two yet to be identified bodies were found inside the burned building. Nalukui and the Human Rights Group are also suspected of being behind the vicious killing of the Bemba Prince, Chitimwaiche. She and some of her colleagues have been brought in for questioning in connection with the incident. She rejects the allegations. More on this story as it develops.

"In other news, the construction of the new Naleli Satellite Facility is on course and the groundbreaking ceremony is set for tomorrow—"

"Boss, Mr Lindunda is here to see you," Liseli said as she opened the office door and popped in her head. Nyambe sighed.

"Send him in."

Nambulo Lindunda was wearing a robe even more pristine than the one he had worn on his first visit. His face was still an emotionless mask, but Nyambe thought he saw a faint cheer in his eye.

"Hello, detective. I'm sure you've heard the news," Nambulo said.

"I have."

"So, someone else has solved the mystery for you?"

"No," the detective responded. "I was the one who chased down Nalukui, and I have the aches and bruises to prove it. I also made that anonymous call to the police."

"Oh? The King will be pleased. You have evidence that the HRG was behind the murder?"

"Not yet. I'm waiting for a new toxicology report from a colleague of mine, which will show that Nalukui and her people used a chemical agent to control the animal," Nyambe replied as he reclined in his chair.

"I pray that you're right. Our time is nearly up," said Nambulo. "I'm told Chitimukulu is readying his army. We must prove to the Bemba that this was not an act of war."

The detective grunted in agreement. "I'll be in touch," he said.

After Nambulo left, the ng'aka rubbed his temples, then got up to pour himself a glass of Nakambala cane spirit. He took a large gulp, hoping his breakthrough might be at the bottom of his glass.

An AI voice in his earpiece notified him that "Sepo, Forensics Lab" was calling. "Answer," he said.

"Hey doc!" Sepo said.

"Tell me you have some good news."

"Straight to it, huh? Okay! So, we broadened our tests for various drugs with the potential for mind control ... mescaline, LSD that sort of thing. But we found nothing new, still just the psilocybin."

"I know the CIA experimented with psilocybin and other drugs for mind control in the 1950s," the detective said, "though I'm not sure about their success. Couldn't Nalukui and her thugs have replicated the procedures and broken through with the technology we have today?"

"Not necessarily," Sepo replied. "All we found were traces of raw psilocybin in the animal's stomach and blood, nothing else. I'd need to do some more digging, but what I know is that psilocybin can't be used on its own to create any 'mind control serum', if you will. There were no other drugs or compounds present in Impala 180's body that could have been combined with it. And the high psilocybe levels in his blood look more like he was on a strict low-carb diet of magic mushrooms."

The ng'aka paused to think. "And we already established that animals aren't known to consume hallucinogenic mushrooms..." he said.

"No, they aren't. I solved this mystery already; Impala 180 must have had a bad trip and attacked the prince! And this is where things get a little more interesting. I ran my findings by an old mushroom forager uncle of mine. He says that the fungi we found is endemic to the Old Liuwa National Park area."

"The liberty cap," said Nyambe.

"Yes! *Psilocybe semilanceata*, how did you know?"

"A government spokesperson told me. But if Impala 180 was at Limulunga when the murder happened, how was he eating mushrooms from Liuwa?" the detective asked.

"Exactly!"

“Very strange. I’ll need to look into it. Thank you, Sepo. I owe you one,” Nyambe said.

“You owe me twenty-one, I’ve been counting!”

“I’ll square up as soon as I solve this case. I promise.”

“And doc? I’ve been meaning to ask...” Sepo said.

“Yes?”

“If you’re a high-level witchdoctor or whatever, why don’t you just consult your ancestors about these things? Don’t they have all the answers?”

The ng’aka was amused. “The ancestors don’t always have answers to scientific questions. More importantly, the ancestors are upset with me for something I don’t want to get into right now. Let’s just say I need to make countless offerings to get in their good books again.”

“You’ll need to tell me about that over some drinks soon!” Sepo laughed.

“Sure. That’ll be a long night,” Nyambe said.

The ng’aka considered the information he had so far. The sitondo were the initial suspects and Mungoni had destroyed his truth charm, proving he might have something to hide. However, the rain doc—the rainmakers would not gain anything from starting a war with the Bemba Kingdom. The Human Rights Group seemed to be the likely perpetrators, but Nalukui claimed to have no means of controlling the animals. But why did Impala 180 have a stomach full of a rare psychoactive mushroom?

He poured himself another drink and paced about the room, thinking.

Everything now seemed to point to Old Liuwa and the Naledi Satellite Facility, even the news stories. Detective Nyambe needed to find out if it was all connected; it couldn’t wait, the groundbreaking ceremony for the facility would be taking place the next day. He didn’t possess a vehicle that was fast enough to get him all the way to the Liuwa plains in good time. No public transportation went that way either. He would need to use dark arts.

The ng’aka asked his assistant to purchase him a black chicken, and then told her she could leave for the day. He activated the photochromic feature of his large windows to darken his office. He slit the bird’s throat and with its dripping blood, drew a perfect circle in the centre of the floor. Stripping down to nothing, he sat down on a bottle cap he had fished from his trash can, and began to chant an ancient incantation. His voice grew deeper, and his chants faster as he shook his hands and spattered the chicken blood all over the floor. His body slowly began to rise with the bottle cap beneath him and in an instant, he teleported out of the room.



The sky was slowly dissolving into darkness over Old Liuwa National Park. Earth-moving machinery had been parked on the outskirts of what used to be a thriving forest, and one of the oldest conservation areas in the country. A few scant trees and grass still stood, most notably a small grove of massive baobab trees which had been on that land for hundreds of years.

The ng'aka crash-landed near the grove, naked as the day he was born and nearly as disoriented. His heart was pounding hard enough to explode from his chest, and he waited for it to calm before trying to find his bearings. He stooped low in a patch of long, dry grass, and then began to move when he saw that there was nobody in sight—although he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched.

He crept through the grass towards the stand of baobabs. There he found a sea of mushrooms, their brown caps blending in with the parched landscape. When he hunched low to pluck one, a large impala emerged from behind a baobab tree and stared at him. Nyambe's first instinct was to reach for his kaliloze, and his second to cover his nakedness. Then another impala appeared. And another. And another. They all seemed to be glaring at him, and he was unsure what to do.

Before Nyambe could speak, the largest among the impala charged towards him. The ng'aka rolled onto the ground and out of its path, then backed away slowly, holding his arms up in surrender, and in readiness for an attack. The four impalas stepped into a "V" formation, with the narrow end facing Nyambe. Still slowly backing away, Nyambe observed that the impala were protecting three calves and a female in the centre. The larger impalas shielding the herd parted to make a small opening at the intersection of their formation. An elderly impala with long horns twisted like the branches of a jacaranda tree walked through and faced the detective ng'aka. It appeared to be the alpha male of the herd. Nyambe continued to walk backwards, with the impalas keeping their gaze on him.

When he thought he was at a safe distance, Detective Nyambe double-tapped his earpiece and said, "Call Muyangwa Mungoni." After several rings, the sitondo picked up.

"Baba Sitondo, this is Detective Nyambe. I know I'm probably the last person you want to hear from right now," Nyambe said, "but I need your help."

"Why would I want to help you, witchdoctor?"

"Because you would be helping the kingdom of Barotseland. You might be able to clear your name from this mess."

Mungoni was silent.

"Well?" asked Nyambe.

"What do you need me to do?" Mungoni replied.

"I need you to come to the plains of Old Liuwa. I'm sending you a location."

"Will you tell me what this is about?"

"I'd like you to *speak* with some impala," Nyambe said. "I'm certain they know what happened with Impala 180."

"I'll be there tomorrow morning," Mungoni said.

"I need you to come now. This is urgent."

"Fine," the sitondo replied.

"How soon can you get here?" asked Nyambe.

Mungoni had cut the line. Nyambe muttered some swear words and was about to redial the sitondo when he heard the familiar rumble of angry thunder.

A flash of lightning tore up the sky and crashed into the earth, nearly striking Nyambe. Muyangwa Mungoni stood in its wake a few metres away from the ng'aka, his robe smoking. He patted out a small flame on his shoulder.

"Thank you for coming so quickly," Nyambe said. "Now let's see if we can secure my retirement."

EPILOGUE

The Zambia Daily Mail, *July 2X25. Story by Musole Silungwe.*

In a bizarre turn of events, it has been revealed that the killing of the Bemba prince, Chitimwaiche, was co-ordinated by a herd of impalas from Old Liuwa National Park. Last week, Impala 180, as it became popularly known, viciously attacked the successor to the Bemba throne while he was attending the Kuomboka traditional ceremony in Barotseland. The animal was initially unco-operative with sitondo investigators, choosing to remain silent after committing the horrendous act. Before a trial could take place, the impala was killed while in police custody. Foul play was suspected, and there is now evidence that the black mamba that assassinated Impala 180 was sent by the Liuwa Impala herd's alpha male.

After a private investigation launched by the Barotse Royal Establishment and Detective Mubita Nyambe, it has come to light that the intended target of the attack was His Royal Highness, the Litunga.

Detective Nyambe had enlisted the help of Muyangwa Mungoni, the Prime Sitondo of Barotseland to solve the case. We learned from Mungoni that the animal explained that the attack was meant to prevent the construction of the new Naleli Satellite Facility at Old Liuwa. The location is considered sacred ground by the impala, who have avoided contact with humans for decades—until now.

The evidence that Mungoni retrieved was corroborated by independent sitondo from the Bemba Kingdom as well. The elder Impala told the sitondo that his kind had lived on the land for generations, and poachers and climate change had long since destroyed their main sources of food. The few impalas that remained were forced to consume mushrooms containing psilocibin, a psychoactive ingredient found in psychedelic mushrooms. This substance is known to improve neuroplasticity or brain plasticity in humans, which refers to the brain's ability to change, adapt and reorganise itself throughout life. Psilocibin allows the brain to form new neural connections and modify existing ones in response to learning experiences or environmental changes. Detective Nyambe speculates that the mushrooms may have altered the impalas' brains over time, and given the antelopes higher intelligence, explaining their uncanny ability to organise an offensive strike. Scientists are still looking into the plausibility of this extraordinary occurrence.

The Impala leader said the goal was not violence against the humans, but to stop the building of the satellite facility, which would lead to the uprooting of a stand of ancient baobab trees on the land. While it was explained to the animals that the trees would be replanted elsewhere, they noted that this would still result in the loss of an ecosystem that had been repairing itself for many years after human destruction. Human researchers have verified this, and have also released information showing that thousands, if not millions of micro-organisms live within the trees and beneath the soil of the Liuwa plains. Removing the baobabs would disturb this ecology, and the impala did not want the land to become barren again. Hence their decision to remove "the leader of the human herd", the Litunga. Though the beasts may have acquired some higher intelligence from the mushrooms, they do not understand how human society functions, and their plan was clearly flawed.

The authorities have decided to halt the operations at Old Liuwa and instead will move the construction of the satellite facility to the Northern Province. In a gesture of peace and condolences, the Litunga has offered to build the facility in the Bemba Kingdom, and will collaborate with their scientists on the project. The satellite will also be named after Chitimwaiche. The Bemba King, Chitimukulu says that while he is still mourning the loss of his son, this is a welcome development; the weather satellite will help alleviate the challenges of climate change. He also has initiated a programme to improve human and animal relations in his own kingdom, to prevent unfortunate events like the death of Chitimwaiche from happening again.

About the team

LAUREN BEUKES



Lauren Beukes is an award-winning South African novelist and screenwriter, now based in London. She's the author of six novels, including *The Shining Girls*, now a major AppleTV show and *Zoo City*, which won the Arthur C Clarke Award. Her books have been translated into 26 languages and have won international literary prizes. She's a former journalist who worked in kids TV for five years, as showrunner on South Africa's first animated TV show, *Pax Afrika*. She directed an award-winning documentary, *Glitterboys & Ganglands*, and has given talks around the world on the intersections of culture, tech, politics, and storytelling. She's a champion of African creativity on the international stage, and has raised over a million rand for charity in fundraisers inspired by her books.

Her story, "Agapantha", was inspired by protests in Essouira in 2025, and she's grateful to the Moroccan and Egyptian activists and authenticity readers who took the time to read multiple drafts, make invaluable suggestions, and check the Darija used in the story.

MAME BOUGOUMA DIENE



Mame Bougouma Diene is a Franco–Senegalese American humanitarian based in Dakar, the francophone spokesperson for the African Speculative Fiction Society (<http://www.africansfs.com/>), once and future French language editor for *Omenana* magazine, and a former columnist at *Strange Horizons*. You can find his fiction and nonfiction work in *Omenana*, *Galaxies SF*, *Edilivres*, *Fiyah!*, *Truancy Magazine*, *EscapePod*, *Mythaxis*, *Apex* magazine, *Interzone* and *TorDotCom*; and in anthologies such as *AfroSFv2 & V3* (Storytime), *Myriad Lands* (Guardbridge Books), *You Left Your Biscuit Behind* (Fox Spirit Books), *This Book Ain't Nuttin to Fuck Wit* (Clash Media), *Africanfuturism* (Brittle Paper), *Dominion* (Aurelia Leo), *Meteotopia* (Future Fiction/Co-Futures in English and Italian), *Bridging Worlds* (Jembefola Press) and *Africa Risen* (TorDotCom). His novelette *The Satellite Charmer* has been translated into Italian by Moscabianca Edizioni, his novelette *Ogotemmel's Song* has been translated into Bangla by Joydhak Prakashan, and his short story “Leki Leki” is currently under translation in Lule Saami. He was nominated for several Nommo Awards, and his debut collection *Dark Moons Rising on a Starless Night* (Clash Books) was nominated for the 2019 Splatterpunk Award. His short story “A Soul of Small Places”, co-authored with his spouse Woppa Diallo, won the 2023 Caine Prize for African Writing.

BWANGA KAPUMPA



Bwanga Kapumpa is a fiction and creative nonfiction writer. His short stories have been published by the Caine Prize for African Writing, the Afritondo Short Story Prize, and New Contrast, among others, and he has been shortlisted twice for the Miles Morland Foundation scholarship. Bwanga also works as a conceptual artist, and his installations have been shown in Livingstone, Zambia, the 13th Berlin Biennale in Germany, and the 10th Serendipity Arts Festival in Goa, India. Bwanga is currently pursuing a Masters in Creative Writing at the University of Cape Town.

MUTHI NHLEMA



Muthi Nhlema is a Malawian writer who resisted the speculative fiction label for years, lost the argument, and now wears it with a ridiculous grin. His work spans novellas and short fiction exploring alternate African futures and histories.

His first novella, *Ta O'Reva*, imagining Nelson Mandela's return to a post-apocalyptic South Africa, won third prize in the 2015 International Freeditorial Long-Short Story Competition. The novella was shortlisted for Best Novella at the 2017 Nommo Awards.

His short story "One Wit' This Place" opened the anthology *Imagine Africa 500* and was named among the Top Ten African Speculative Fiction stories of 2016. His 2024 novelette *Hiraeth*, from the eco-fiction anthology *Mombera Rising*, was longlisted for the BSFA Awards and named among the Ten Best African Science Fiction stories. A recent detour into cultural satire, *Piss Corpse*, opened the ZamaShort series and made Afrocritik's 50 Remarkable African Short Stories of 2025. In 2021, he was selected for the prestigious International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, the fifth Malawian to join since 1967.

He lives with his wife, whose reasons for marrying him remain a mystery, and their thirteen-year-old son, who continues his relentless campaign to get Muthi interested in anime.

CHINELO ONWUALU



Chinelo Onwualu is a Nigerian writer, editor, and journalist living in Toronto. She teaches creative writing at the University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies. She's the co-host of *Griots and Galaxies*, a podcast about African speculative fiction and the people who write it. She's also co-founder of *Omenana*, a magazine of African speculative fiction. She has been chief spokesperson for the African Speculative Fiction Society and a graduate of the Clarion West Writers Workshop, which she attended as the recipient of the Octavia E. Butler Scholarship. Her short stories have been featured in *Slate.com*, *Uncanny*, *Strange Horizons*, *The Kalahari Review* and *Brittle Paper* magazines, and several award-winning anthologies. She's been nominated for the Locus Award, the Ignyte Community Award, the British Science Fiction Award, the Nommo Award for African Speculative Fiction, and the Short Story Day Africa Award.

HELEN MOFFETT



Helen Moffett is a freelance editor, author, academic, poet (her second collection, *Prunings*, was the joint winner of the 2017 SALA prize), feminist and environmental activist, scholar and teacher. She's worked as an academic (UCT's English Department and African Gender Institute, and at several universities abroad) and a publisher (OUPSA), but also as a freelance editor and writing consultant for much of the past 30 years. She specialises in development editing, and her clients include academic, publishing and non-profit institutions. In 2019, she was named one of the African continent's top ten literary editors/curators. Among the +-25 books she's authored, co-authored or collated, two are guides on environmental care and she's been the subject of a German documentary film as a "water warrior". <https://www.helenmoffett.com>.

AMY CHEN



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MULAKO KABISA



Postdoctoral Research Fellow on transformation pathways and bottom-up nature futures at Wits University.

SÈNANKPON TCHETON



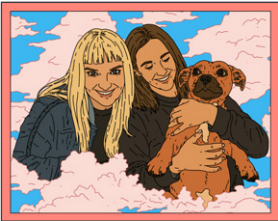
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LAURA PEREIRA



Professor of Sustainability Transformations and Futures at the University of the Witwatersrand and the Stockholm Resilience Centre.

ARTISTS



Anja “Nanna” Venter and Danielle Hitchcock are sisters from another life, who occasionally collaborate on illustrations. They both live in Cape Town with their respective cats and dog.



I believe in the power of stories. They help us understand who we are and where we've come from. When storytelling combines with imagination something amazing starts to happen: we start to explore a different future. Africa Phambili does exactly that. The stories invite us to imagine an Africa refreshingly defined by the authors themselves. They remind us that every transformation begins as an act of imagination. Before we can build a different future in Africa, we must first imagine it and then believe it is possible. That is the enduring power of storytelling - and the hope that is in the pages of this anthology. The writers have done the work, now all we have to do is read it to believe it.

MOKY MAKURA

*Africa is moving to the center of humanity's future, and its potential for providing a good life for all its living inhabitants, including its wildlife, is immense. What's needed in this moment of exciting possibilities are the stories that tell these positive futures in ways that inspire us and orient our activities in the present to make them come to pass. That's what the stories in this book do. As a utopian science fiction writer, author of *The Ministry for the Future*, I can testify that there is a great hunger for these stories, and a great pleasure in reading them. Try these and see!*

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON

We are living through times of great change. Hard realities are confronting. Yet huge potential is also readily available if we can just open our hearts and minds. Through the art and craft of these stories, readers are encouraged to take a step into the unknown, living other lives and exploring possible futures that hold hope. The invitation rises from the page to inspire us towards acting towards a future that aligns our needs with those of our wild and wonderful planet Earth.

GILL EINHORN

Who gets to decide what the future looks like? The answer is we all do. It is in negotiation with everyone that we can first imagine the future then, ultimately, seek to make it real. This is why these stories are important. It will be in our collective imaginations that the future that seemed impossible suddenly seems inevitable. This anthology contributes to that collective imagination.

CHARLES EBIKEME

